

*Appointment with Disaster, Volume I, The Swelling of the Flood: Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania Before and After the Agnes Flood of June 23, 1972.* By Anthony J. Mussari. Wilkes Barre: Northeast Publishers, 1974. Pp. xviii + 158. Illustrations. \$3.50.

This descriptive analysis of the Wilkes Barre flood was conceived with an admirable purpose: to present an accurate account of this catastrophic event, which will serve as an impetus to planning for other flood susceptible communities in the United States. Presumably, if the problems which Wilkes Barre faced are made known and looked at objectively, these problems may be avoided and/or solved in disaster planning and future disaster situations. However, the author's expectations will be only partially fulfilled through this presentation due to problems which are inherent in the research itself and the difficulty in reaching the audience addressed. First, Mussari fluctuates in his diligence in representing "the facts", and the views of various groups and organizations. For example, while the purposes and activities of the emergent citizens' groups are extensively portrayed, the inner workings of the various relief agencies and organizations (with the exception of Civil Defense) are basically ignored with only a miniscule view of them given. Second, it is a questionable assumption that other American communities will re-evaluate their disaster planning and preparation solely as a consequence of reading this book. However, this is, of course, not under the control of the author. The review which follows will focus primarily on three general topics: first, the style of the descriptive analysis; second, the author's treatment of misconceptions of human responses to disasters which are generally accepted in the United States; and third, the significance of the forthcoming Volume II of this book.

This is a well-written book, which will prove to be quite readable to anyone who will spend a few hours with it. The various stages of the disaster experience, i.e., the previous floods,

the warning period, the evacuation, the impact of the flood waters, and the response to the devastation during the three months following the crisis, are clearly described with colorful background materials, descriptive sequences, anecdotes, and illustrations by Rosalie Staley. However, the frequency and the length of the anecdotes seems at times to overshadow the substance being communicated. But more serious than excessive narrative are the factual inaccuracies which are found. For example, with respect to the community hospitals, of the four major references to these one is overplayed in terms of its significance and the other three are factually inaccurate.<sup>1</sup> While this is disturbing, it would be unfair to make the assumption that other facts are incorrect. However, it would seem that some caution is advisable.

An irritating thorn in the side of many disaster researchers is the perpetuation of various myths about human responses to disasters, in spite of the existence of reams of evidence which refute them. "... I have tried to separate myth from reality..." says Mussari; and with respect to several misconceptions about disaster behavior he has generally succeeded. The myths which *Appointment With Disaster* helps to dispel deal with panic behavior, irrational and dazed responses by victims, community disorganization, and low community morale. However, there is one misconception perpetuated by the narrative of this book. This is the myth which exaggerates the amount of anti-social behavior following a disaster, e.g., looting.

The Wilkes Barre flood may be added to the long list of disasters in which there was *not* panic behavior on the part of the residents in the threatened area. However, it is interesting to note that the Civil Defense personnel were operating under the assumption that there would be mass panic and wild flight when the evacuation notice was issued. Therefore, the

<sup>1</sup> The research for my doctoral dissertation, "Hospitals In 'Rough Waters': The Effects of a Flood Disaster on Organizational Change," Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University, 1975, made this data available.

evacuation warning was not issued until a flood was no longer simply a possibility but an inevitability. Even with this relatively short notice, the residents, who were forced to leave their homes, proceeded quite deliberately and rationally. The great confusion and congestion, which the media so frequently publicized, actually resulted, in great part, from the convergence of sightseers immediately after the flood. In contrast to this disorderliness, the voluntarism which the potential flood victims had demonstrated in the sandbagging effort continued at the evacuation centers and in the clean-up period. In instance after instance, disaster victims were themselves helping to provide the necessary assistance and services in the recovery period. Whether it was within the boundaries of an established agency such as Red Cross, or within the citizens' groups, which emerged after the disaster to aid in the community's recovery, the organization of these volunteers and their immediate response is impressive. It is especially noteworthy when the scope of this disaster is realized – 30,000 families left homeless immediately after the flood.

If Wilkes Barre had been populated by panic stricken, dazed, irrational, and helpless people following the flood, it would have been reasonable to assume that community morale would be very low. However, as the reader sees in the various documentations of victim responses, this was not the case. Instead we are told that the prevailing mood, even when there were problems with the relief assistance, was that “this was not a time to be critical”. And even the long standing antagonisms between the

ethnic groups were less evident in the flood recovery period than prior to the disaster.

A breakdown in social control, both formal and informal, is likely to occur in a situation of great disorganization and one where morale, i.e., cohesiveness, is minimal. As this book has clearly depicted, this was not the case in Wilkes Barre. Why then does the author find it important to present two hearsay instances of looting? One would be more interested in the number of arrests for looting as a measure of the extent of anti-social behavior following this flood. Disaster research has shown that *when* looting does occur it is, more often than not, done by those who are supposedly doing the guarding; or “reported looting” may actually represent items lost in the disaster and not missed until a few days later.

And finally, with a perhaps premature comment, the author should be commended for having the insight to extend his study of this great disaster over a longer time period than three months. Mussari comments, “few recovery specialists were considering the future and future floods.” In spite of this short-sightedness on the part of these specialists, the conscientious researcher should, and in this case does, explore the implications of various decisions for the long-run effect on a disaster stricken community. We are told that this is the intent of Volume II, and will anxiously await its publication.

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