

BOOK REVIEWS

Anthony J. Mussari. “The Agnes Flood Disaster as an Agent of Community Change in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania 1972–76.”

Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1978, 371 pp.

The author’s goal in this history dissertation is to analyze a major natural disaster as an agent of community change. To accomplish this, Mussari divides the work into two sections: one descriptive, the other analytical. The first section (Chapters 1–3) describes: (1) the socio-economic history of the disaster community, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; (2) the events of the disaster; and (3) the activities of the major evacuation center. The second section (Chapters 4–6) is devoted to the effect of the flood upon three agencies: (1) Wilkes-Barre Urban Redevelopment Authority; (2) Wilkes-Barre Area School District; and (3) Wilkes-Barre Industrial Development Authority.

Much of the first section of this text is of little consequence to the overall purpose of the work. Although the history of the community is well documented and a fine critique of Civil Defense operations is offered, the author does not tie these points into his major theme – the disaster as an agent in community change. In addition, a considerable portion of this section is lifted (much of it word-for-word) from the author’s previous publication, *Appointment with Disaster* (1974). For instance, pages 63–66 of the earlier work are identical to pages 121–26 of the dissertation. Also, the story of the evacuation center can be found in both. It is a mystery why the earlier work is neither footnoted nor included in the bibliography.

In the second section, the author utilizes

three agencies as a vehicle to demonstrate that the Agnes disaster was a major causal factor in the transformation of the community. He concludes that the flood had a negative effect on the school system and a positive impact upon urban redevelopment and industrial development. In an analytical and well-documented fashion, the author shows how the disaster induced change. In fact, he clearly presents how much of the change was planned, although unaccomplished, before the disaster. By doing so, this work represents a fine contribution to disaster research in a much-needed area. Apparently, the author benefitted from his roles of school board member, college faculty member, television editorialist and resident in the impacted community. These positions gave him the opportunity to gather first-hand information which is seldom available to a disaster researcher from outside the area.

Another strength of the study is that it covered a five-year time span. Longitudinal analysis is a rare and welcome addition to the disaster literature. The second section of this work is highly recommended to those who have an interest in organizational and community transformation following disaster.

The work would have benefitted from a literature review and a methodology section. Except for a few references to the works of Prince, Bates, Quarantelli and some others, Mussari does not attempt to integrate his work with previous studies. For instance, Blanshan’s *Hospitals in “Rough Waters”: The Effects of a Flood Disaster on Organizational Change* (1975) was a study also done on the Agnes Disaster. It would have aided Mussari’s study if he had referred to it and other disaster

literature. Secondly, one can only hazard educated guesses at what research techniques were utilized. The author does list interviews, documents and observation throughout the text; however, someone attempting to replicate such a study in a future disaster would be aided by explicit methodological statements and suggestions.

Mussari's penchant for extensive documentation is an act well worth following by other disaster researchers. The work relies heavily on the data rather than on unfounded assertion. The author allows the reader to follow him through the data and to the conclusion in such a way that his findings rest on a sound empirical base. Because of this, his lack of an explicit methodology section represents a deficiency, but not a detriment, to his work. Thus, this case study (especially the second half) is one of importance which should significantly assist future researchers interested in community change following a disaster.

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