

Asheville's Great Flood of 1916: Can it happen again?

Carol Rifkin, *Citizen-Times* correspondent 11:35 a.m. EST November 30, 2015



(Photo: *Citizen-Times* photo)

Cultural amnesia. That's what David Weintraub calls the process of forgetting past events, the people involved and how it impacts us today. As executive director of the Center for Cultural Preservation, his next program, "Come Hell or High Water, Remembering the Flood of 1916," will explore the flood's impact as we approach the 100-year anniversary of Western North Carolina's worst natural disaster.

Segments of a documentary in the works, music and a knowledgeable panel are all part of the program, set for 7 p.m. Dec. 3 at Blue Ridge Community College's Patton Auditorium. This is not a history program; it's a provocative investigation into where we've been and what might happen in the future.

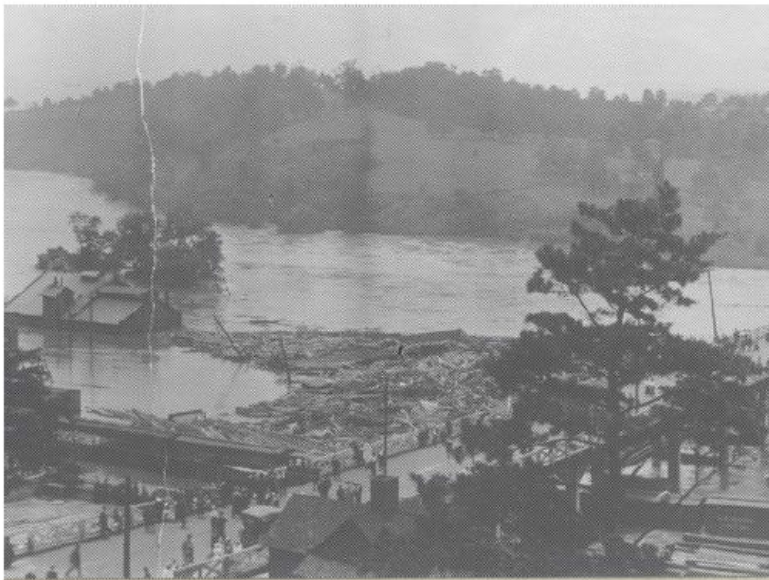
"I was intrigued by the flood because it was such a powerful moment in our history, yet like so much history, the memories have dissipated," Weintraub said. "On the cusp of the 100-year anniversary, I wondered if there was anyone left who remembered it."

After contacting churches and fire departments, a trickle of folks responded, then a flood of people started to contact him with family stories and photographs of the devastation delivered that July, at the peak of the harvest season.

"It wasn't like, if your crops flooded you could go to Walmart," Weintraub said. "Your food for the next winter was gone. You had what you grew and what you could barter. If you lost that, you were in a critical situation. That's what happened in North Carolina."

Not one, but two perfect storms together brought our greatest floods to the mountains.

The summer rains in Western North Carolina began July 3, 1916, and it rained for 10 straight days. On July 5 and 6, a category three hurricane hit the Gulf Coast of Alabama and Florida, the earliest major hurricane to make landfall in U.S. history until 1957. By July 7, the weakened storm was dropping heavy rainfall over the N.C. foothills and mountains.



Several buildings and streets were heavily damaged in 1916 when the rain-swollen French Broad River exceeded its banks, especially in the Depot Street-Lyman Street area. (Photo: *Citizen-Times* photo)

It rained daily through July 14. That day, a category two hurricane hit Charleston, South Carolina and hit the mountains as a tropical storm July 15 and 16. Rivers were already flooding; with nowhere for the water from the second hurricane to go, most became run-off, never entering the ground, rushing to overfull waterways.

The French Broad River crested at an estimated 21 feet, some 17 feet above flood stage. The average width of the French Broad near Asheville in 1916 was 381 feet. During the flood, it was approximately 1,300 feet across.

In some locations, the Catawba River rose almost 23 feet beyond previous high-water marks. By Sunday July 16, almost every dam in WNC had burst. The Rocky Broad River, Green River, Mills River, Big Hungry River and French Broad all overflowed.

Houses washed away, landslides engulfed houses and people, all bridges and train trestles were washed away. Most communication between WNC and the outside world was cut off.

"Officially, 80 people died but the old folks say that didn't account for the people in the backcountry, only covered the cities," Weintraub said. "There were 300 mud and landslides."

Recordings of a survivor describe the roar of the mudslide as it approached their home and took off the back porch, eventually the whole house. Weintraub says a common thread through survivor accounts is the wall of sound that accompanied the arriving water and mud.

"People weren't living on the ridges then," Weintraub said. "Today, they are in a much more vulnerable position. The 1916 flood has so many lessons in how we build, where we build, understanding how to be prepared as well."



Butler Bridge in Asheville was covered by the flooding of the French Broad River in July 1916. (Photo: Citizen-Times photo)

"Our elders have a lesson on being prepared, canning food, having stores available in case something happens. Being prepared was the hallmark of living in this place in the mountains and few people have those skills anymore."

Weintraub will be joined on the Dec. 3 panel by Henderson County historian Jennie Jones Giles, director for UNCA's National Environmental Modeling and Analysis Center James Fox, Henderson County Code Enforcement Services Director Toby Linville, Asheville Stormwater Services Manager McCray Coates and local mountain elders.

Weintraub hopes programs like this might help people prepare to weather their own storms in a culture where few even know their neighbors.

"We have elders, we have authorities, we'll be playing some of the music," Weintraub said. "We'll have scientists who can talk about what happened and, if it were to happen today, what we might need to do. No one wants someone to tell them what to do but our elders were connected to the land and were good stewards of the land. They had large tracts. Today we have small lots. What we do can have profound effects on each other."

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