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Film asks whether we learned lessons from the flood of 1916

By **BILL MOSS**
 Lightning Editor

Jennie Jones Giles recalls family stories about her forebears fleeing for high ground as the flood 1916 threatened their cabin on Bright's Creek in Polk County. Drew Brannon remembers his grandfather's tales about chickens and livestock floating down the French Broad River near the family farm.

In Bat Cave, catastrophic landslides "removed everything clear and clean in their paths," W.S. Fallis, of the State Highway Commission, said a month after making an extensive survey of flood damage. "Everything moveable in their path was swept to the river below. Trees were absolutely denuded of every vestige of bark. Rocks were ground smooth. Buildings were carried away in an irresistible rush."

The imperative of the double-zero is bringing a flood of memories. The N.C. Division of Archives and History has produced "So Great the Devastation," the name of both an exhibit and a 45-page book on the flood of 1916.

David Weintraub, an award-winning documentary maker, next week debuts his hour-long film on the flood.

"I've done about 80 oral histories and one of the recurring themes is this flood that left an indelible mark



PHOTO BY WILLIAM BARNHILL, POLK MEMORIAL LIBRARY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
 South Depot Street near the Highland Hotel in Asheville is shown in the flood of 1916.

on these families and cut branches off family trees in some cases," Weintraub says. The documentary looks back and looks forward — and warns that we've learned no lessons from the 1916 flood and other big storms.

"A wall of rock, mud and wood" Western North Carolina had already endured a rainy summer by early July, notes Giles, a former award-winning reporter and Heritage Mu-

seum director who teaches a course on Henderson County history at Blue Ridge Community College.

"Then a tail end of hurricane hit and that caused all the rivers and creeks to flood, which is very normal for here," she said. "Then we had another period of a lot of rain and then we got hit by the tail end of a hurricane that had come in from Charleston. So we had 10 solid days of rain by

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Special section with things to do.



'Music Man'

Beloved classic opens at Flat Rock Playhouse

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Flood

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that time. There was nowhere for that rain to go since the rivers and creeks were already at flood stage."

Rainfall totals ranged from 14-16 inches in parts of Hendersonville to 22 inches of rain in 34 hours at Altapass, in McDowell County.

In Bat Cave, Brown E. Huntley, woke up to the terrible sounds of the flood at 1 or 2 a.m. Opening the door, he was confronted by "a wall of rock, mud and wood" that pushed the house "right into the clutches of the flood," the *French Broad Husler* reported. Huntley lost his wife, Bella, and their adopted children, Bonale, 7, and Fred Hill, 11, the newspaper reported. (The state Archives and History office reports a third victim in the family, Stacy, 14.)

'They could no longer farm'

Giles's grandfather lived on Bright's Creek in Polk County. She grew up hearing family stories about how the flood affected the people there.

"They were so close to the creek that the water was rising so fast that they feared for their lives," she said. "They walked all the way to Silver Creek Baptist Church for shelter and ended up staying there. The log cabin could be rebuilt. What they discovered the next spring when they went to plant was that all their topsoil had washed away. They could no longer farm."

Further up the mountains, in Asheville, the French Broad crested at 21 feet — 17 feet above flood stage. The average width of the French Broad River was 381 feet. At the height of the flood the river was 1,300 feet across. Government reports at the time pegged property damage at \$22 million, Giles said. That would translate, according to a 2007 report, to \$430 million.

Osceola, Kanuga dams burst

Though not as hard hit as Bat Cave and parts of Edneyville, Hendersonville became an island surrounded by a lake in the flood of 1916 and no one could get in or out of town.

A report in August 1958 by Tennessee Valley Authority's Division of Water Control Planning documented the biggest floods on Mud Creek, Bat Fork, Devils Fork and King Creek in Hendersonville.

The report cited contemporary accounts from the *French Broad Husler* and *Western Carolina Democrat* on

July 17.

"Osceola Lake was the first to go, the dam breaking at 2 o'clock Sunday morning," the newspaper report said. "The Kanuga Dam went down about 10:15 Sunday morning ... and when the water got to Hendersonville the creek rose with amazing rapidity and soon Mud Creek was a veritable Mississippi ..."

"Hicks Garden and Vernon Rogers had a narrow escape Saturday night," the newspaper reported. "They had gone out after some pigs at the end of Depot Street and the rising water forced them to make to the trees where they clung from one o'clock at night until 6 in the morning when they were rescued by parties in a boat."

Family stories survive

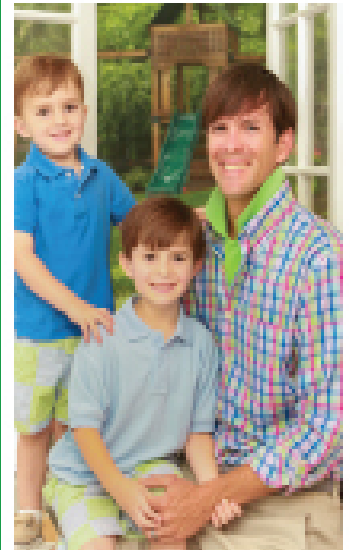
Waltraub's film, "Come Hell Or High Water, Remembering The Flood Of 1916," took shape over the past year as the calendar turned toward the 100th anniversary.

Eyewitness interviews were impossible.

"But there are all these family stories that people recall and we were fortunate to get an interview that had actually been done in the '70s of a nar-

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JOSEPH LAUGHTER CLOTHIER



Father's Day Sunday, June 19th, 2016

Steven Shillinglaw and his sons Eli, 5 and Hayes, 3 are anticipating a very special Father's Day this year. Steven's wife, Amie is expecting the arrival of their baby daughter around that time. Steven is the owner of Red Mountain Landscapes. Amie is very active with the Junior Welfare Club. From our Summer Collection, Steven selected a Peter Millar sport shirt, layered over a Joseph Laughter Private Label polo shirt in mint green. The stone washed flat front shorts are from 34 Heritage in the new light weight stretch twill fabric.

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Flood

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vivor who was then in her 70s," Weintraub said.

That would be Edna Huntley Fryor, who was 24 when the flood washed away the family home on the Middle Fork section of Bat Cave. A family taped her recollection of the event.

There were floods before 1916 and floods after, Weintraub points out.

One hundred years ago, as the rainy summer dragged on, people recalled the flood of 1896. "When they were cleaning up from the flood of 1916, there was the flood of 1928," he said. After that there were major floods in 1940, 1977 and 1996. The remnants of hurricanes Frances and Ivan, on Sept. 1 and Sept. 9, 2004, one from the Gulf of Mexico, the other from the Atlantic Ocean, brought high wind, flooding and landslides.

In other words, there's no reason we couldn't again see a similar merger of weather systems or back-to-back tropical storms. And if we do, the result could be much worse.

The potential for disaster is easy to find. Just look up.

"Local people never built on top of the mountain. I guarantee you that," Giles says. "Every local person I know

drives around and says (of mountain-top homes) 'I wonder when that house is coming down?'

"Nature is always going to win," she adds. "We can build roads and highways above the bogs and rivers and creeks. We can build bridges higher and higher and higher above our waterways and bogs. We can dredge our streams and creeks but some time there's going to come another summer of another heavy rain and we're going to end up with two tall ends of hurricanes again and all the things that men did is going to be worthless."

"Come Hell Or High Water: Remembering The Flood Of 1916" premieres at 7 p.m. Thursday, June 23, at Thomas Auditorium at BRCC. Suggested donation is \$5. The Rocky Fork Band will perform its tribute to the Great Flood and a discussion will follow featuring mountain natives and historians as well as experts in landslides and flood mitigation. Because the program is expected to sell out, advance registration is recommended. Reservations may be made through the Center's website www.southculture.org or by calling (828) 692-8052. The program is co-sponsored by the N.C. Humanities Council, the Henderson County History and Genealogy Center, Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy and Mountain Trust.

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