

## THE CAMILLE FLOOD, 1969

D. E. Brady

Fortnightly Club, 1979

**A** VERY WET 1979, some flooding, and the recent power interruption bring to mind the flood of ten years ago. Hurricane Camille came ashore on August 18 on the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico, inflicting considerable damage and loss of life. It then moved up the Mississippi Valley with diminishing force, as is characteristic of hurricanes when they lose contact with their source of strength, warm sea water.

Camille turned eastward, coursing through Kentucky; it then came to the mountains of West Virginia. There it was considered almost dead, for it amounted to only heavy rainfall — now merely a tropical low, considered practically harmless, as it crossed into Virginia.

But as it reached the Blue Ridge, it was met by a warm moist front sucked in from the Atlantic by Camille's low pressure. The combination of mountain altitude, warm moist air, and the low-pressure center caused incredible amounts of rain to fall in the area of east Rockbridge, Nelson and Amherst Counties. It was estimat-

Douglas E. "Pat" Brady was mayor of Lexington in 1969, when the events he describes occurred. He was also a town and city council member for many years. He was a leader of Historic Lexington Foundation, Rockbridge Historical Society, the Stonewall Jackson House, the local hospital and the Red Cross. He died in 2001.

ed that 27 inches of rain fell in only a few hours. The people who lived through it witnessed a literally awesome display of nature's might. Small spring branches and dry gullies became raging torrents; rivers leaped beyond their banks. Rain-soaked mountainsides sloughed off the bedrock, carrying with them mud, rocks and trees, and sweeping away everything in their paths.

Some people were warned by the noise of the rising waters; others by a sense of danger. One man smelled crushed trees. Others were less fortunate: A total of 113 people died; 39 were missing and presumed dead; 102 were injured.

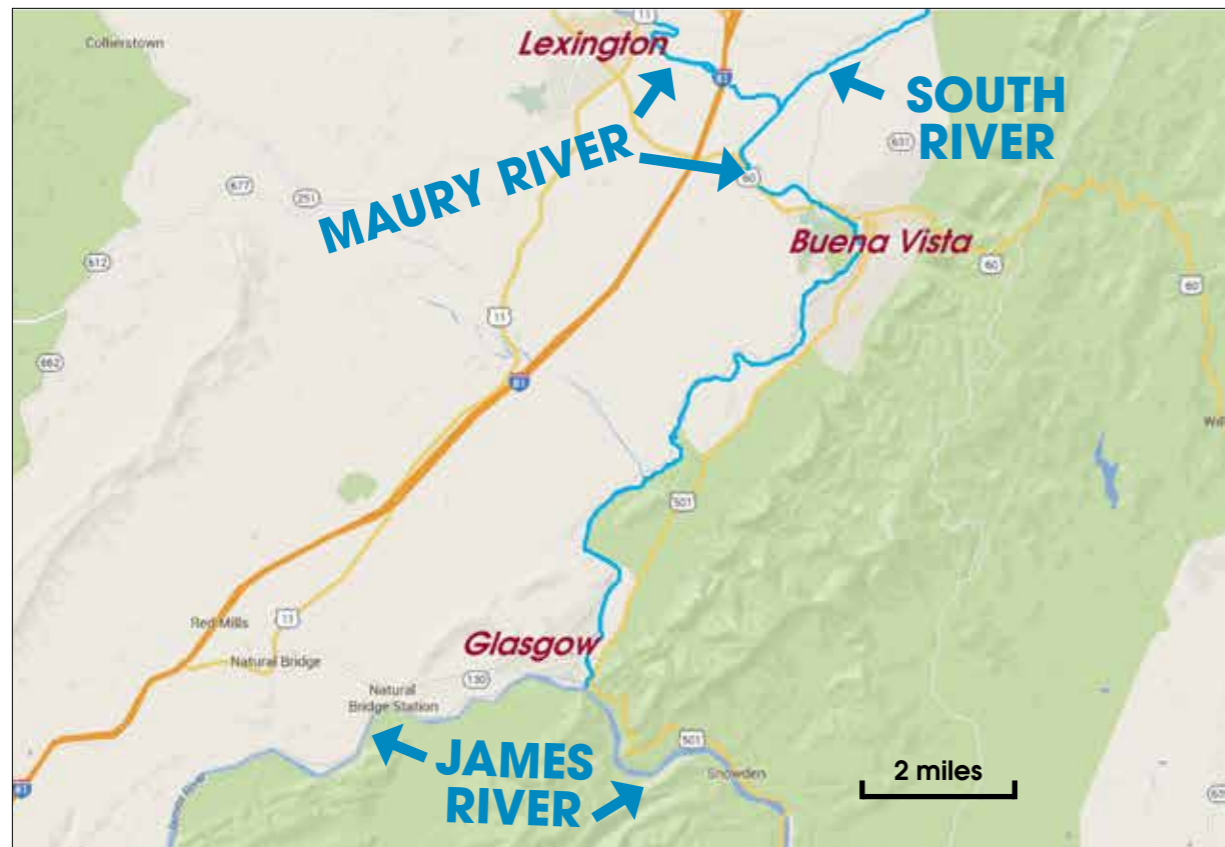
All of this happened in the night; by daylight, most of the damage had been done. Glasgow was still inundated; days later, Richmond would suffer as the flood waters moved downstream.

Lexington had minor damage, in contrast to that in Buena Vista and Glasgow. The Maury River washed out the C&O railroad trestle at East Lexington, stopping, possibly forever, the coming of trains to Lexington.\* Businesses along the river and

\* In 1978, the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad Company deeded the railbed near Lexington to the Nature Conservancy; soon the Virginia Military Institute assumed ownership and began developing it as a seven-mile hiking trail.



Route 39 at Rockbridge Baths. All photographs courtesy of the Lexington News-Gazette.



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some houses at East Lexington were flooded. Water covered the sewage treatment plant, causing considerable damage. The water main from Moores Creek dam was broken at the Buffalo Creek crossing, but there was water in the main tank at the filter plant, and Lexington experienced no water shortage. There was, however, some damage throughout town due to wind, lightning, and small-stream flooding.

Since the heaviest rainfall occurred east of Lexington in the Blue Ridge, Buena Vista suffered much more damage. The Maury River reached a high flood level from the rain in the western part of the county, but it was the contribution from South River that spelled ruin for Buena Vista. South River lies along and takes drainage from the western slopes of the Blue Ridge, and this was the area that took the brunt of the storm in Rockbridge. This river — with the proverbial “wall of water,” laden with mud, stones and debris — swept through its valley, leaving a scene of almost unbelievable destruction.

All this water joined the Maury a mile or two upstream from Buena Vista and bore down on the low-lying parts of that city. To this was added the water descending from the mountain valleys to the east. Buena Vista’s new city hall was damaged, most of the downtown was flooded, factories were inundated, and inches of mud were left on lawns and streets.

Next in Rockbridge to receive the onslaught was Glasgow. This town, located at the confluence of the Maury and James Rivers, did not suffer the fast-flowing water that hit the South River valley and Buena Vista, but large areas were flooded by backwater from the two rivers as they funneled through the narrow Balcony Falls gorge.

Villages in the South River valley — Vesuvius, Midvale, Cornwall, Riverside and Mountain View — were in the direct path of the flood. A large section of stone work washed away from the furnace stack at Mountain View, which had stood since Civil War days.

At the time of the flood, most communities, including Lexington, had Civil Defense organizations on paper. I do not know that any of them functioned. They were primarily geared to war and particularly to nuclear war, so this natural disaster was not seen as worthy of their efforts.

Most aid, therefore, came in the form of individual and local-level efforts. Very soon after the flooding subsided, people began digging out and making plans to rebuild. In spite of its members’ heavy personal losses, the Buena Vista city council assembled to begin coping with the situation. Streets were blocked, property damaged, everything was covered with mud, power was off and, worse yet, the water system was out of commission. Not only were pipes broken but in many places the lines were filled with mud. Lexington’s police received and relayed messages powered by a portable generator. This was done with some difficulty on the Lexington end because the radio tower had been knocked out and police car radios had to be used to





had been called out during the storm and were away from Buena Vista when the flood hit hardest, so they were not trapped in the city. All of the area's first aid and fire departments were soon in action searching for and helping victims.

A loosely organized group in the Lexington area set up a collection and distribution system for food and supplies. This organization became the core for an agency with a much wider coverage. Volunteers scoured the undamaged area for contributions of food, clothing and other items. Stores contributed food and clothing, and civic clubs contributed money and labor. The state Moose Lodges mounted a massive collection of food and clothing, which was sent to the Lexington group by the truckload. Much of it was diverted to Nelson County for distribution there. At first, the Virginia Military Institute field house was used as a center in Lexington. When it was no longer available, the Moose Lodge south of town was used. Many people came to the center and picked up supplies, but much of it was distributed by the



receive messages. The Lexington police also provided a communication link with the sheriff's department in much harder-hit Nelson County. (The now-widespread use of CB radios will be of great help in the event of another such disaster.)

Agencies and organizations mobilized quickly. Virginia Electric Power crews

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first aid and fire departments and by individuals. There was no distribution accounting system nor screening of persons as to need. In the early days at the field house, some people were returning for seconds and thirds, and when they were recognized they were asked to desist.

Most of the supplies were consumed, except for some potato salad in mess-

hall-sized containers that turned out to be unpalatable. Someone discovered a way to heat it so it could be eaten, but most people just would not take it. I suppose that our folks never got *that* hungry. The Welfare, as it was then called, helped identify persons in need. A story was told of one woman who, when she received a new coat, probably donated by Leggett's Department Store, wept, saying that it was the first new coat she had ever owned.

There is no way to give credit to all the people who labored in acquiring and delivering the supplies, but two names stand out. One is Katie Lyle, who did phoning, letter-writing, begging and arm-twisting — and got large contributions of clothes

and bedding. She must have neglected [her husband] Royster dreadfully at that time. The other is C. W. Cauley, then a serviceman for the BARC Electric Co-operative [Bath, Alleghany, Rockbridge Counties]. It seems that he was assigned to the Irish Creek section for restoring power, and on observing the plight of the folks there, he began bringing supplies to them from the Moose Lodge. He must have fed and clothed that community for two months.



Mrs. John Lecher, George Tompkins and George Tompkins III in Glasgow.

The City of Lexington, along with contractors and the highway department, furnished heavy equipment to Buena Vista. The loss of the water supply was the most serious utility loss to Buena Vista and it was one of the last to be restored. Water was first hauled in by tank truck and later was supplied by a Roanoke dairy in jugs. State and Federal agencies also became active providing grants, loans and house trailers.

The Red Cross set up a field office in Buena Vista with a professional disaster staff. At first, it provided emergency aid to all comers. When this need was met, applicants were carefully screened and aid was given in a professional manner. The office functioned for as long as there was a need and before closing it, the Red Cross solicited evaluation of its work. The value of the aid given in that period may never be matched by contributions to the National Red Cross from Rockbridge.



In Glasgow, looking toward where the 10th Street Bridge used to be.

An unexpected form of aid came from Mennonites. This religious group sent teams who helped wherever needed, and when the immediate emergency was over, they rented a house near Mountain View and kept teams of carpenters here who repaired damaged houses and in some cases built new ones. This work continued for many months after the flood.

The question arises: What could have been done to prevent or what might have reduced such destruction? We would first say that people should not build homes and business in the flood plains; it is obvious that if the affected communities had been on higher ground, their losses would have been less. In 1973, Glasgow pressed for and got Virginia Electric Power's Balcony Falls dam, just east of the town, removed. This has lowered the levels of the rivers as they pass the town and it remains to be seen if flooding will be prevented.\* The recent Fantas report chides Buena Vista for not building a flood wall, which would offer a measure of protection.†

\* Not entirely. In November 1985, another hurricane-born flood struck, although the consensus is that removal of the dam prevented a much greater calamity. Ten years later, yet another flood caused \$20 million in damage.

† In the 1990s, the Army Corps of Engineers undertook a \$38-million project to build a flood wall that did provide relief, notably in the 1995 flood.

In hilly country such as ours, a relatively level area by a river and railroad is very attractive to developers, and so it was that Glasgow and Buena Vista were built up in the late 19th century by people who either did not care about or did not know of the dangers. The communities are now well established and must be so dealt with. Future development could be limited by edict, but homes and factory builders will consider that the advantages outweigh the dangers of the infrequent floods. Flood control dams on the Maury might have helped, but only if there had been enough of them to contain and release the flood waters according to a plan. As for the South River above the city, it is unlikely that any system could have been devised that would have controlled that flood. This was perhaps a thousand-year flood, and the scars may be erased before the next one.

Areas that are hurricane- or tornado-prone make use of warning services and have their methods of "battening down the hatches," but even these precautions do not contemplate the direct hit of a Camille-like storm. If the problem were turned over to federal safety regulators, people would be allowed to occupy only places that could not be flooded, are out of reach of landslides, would never be struck by lightning, nor might be shaken by an earthquake. It appears that the safest places for human habitation are adjacent to nuclear power plants, since they have fulfilled these qualifications.

Relief agencies are just that. They render first aid and help with reconstruction — but do not prevent the losses. For the major rebuilding it seems that the

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governmental and quasi-governmental agencies are best able to do the job. The reason: money.

Sam Rayder [a local banker] tells of his youth in a flood-prone section of Arkansas. There, houses had no plaster and were usually built of cypress wood. Interior partitions were of wood covered with cheesecloth and wallpa-

per. By long experience the people knew when to follow the receding water and wash out the mud. The old wall paper was removed and new cheese cloth and paper were applied. But this approach could not be applied to Buena Vista, because houses were swept away, not just surrounded.

For all its intensity, Camille was a local flood whose damage was confined mainly to this area and the James River valley. More dollars of damage may have occurred in Richmond than in Buena Vista — but certainly nothing like the shock that was sustained by eastern Rockbridge and Nelson counties. ■

