

'Dammed' If You Don't:
The Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 in Collective Memory

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ABSTRACT

On December 24, 1924, a wall of water and alkali muck engulfed Palmertown, a small community in Saltville, Virginia. Houses were swept away and by the time all of the bodies were pulled from the wreckage, the death toll had reached 19—an immense loss for the tight-knit community. A dam, owned by Mathieson Alkali Works, loomed approximately 100 feet above Palmertown, keeping at bay the chemical muck produced by the company plants. Despite the extent of the damage, the flood is largely absent from discourse and no historical marker exists to memorialize the tragedy. Furthermore, Palmertown and neighboring Henrytown were expunged in the mid-twentieth century when Olin Corporation rebuilt the dam overtop of the town sites. Stories of the event have been passed down for generations, immortalizing a specific story of the disaster in the memories of many local residents of Saltville, so why is it not memorialized?

The cultural framework of Saltville determined how and why this disaster and others have been remembered or forgotten. In 1924, Saltville residents were accustomed to tragic events; to some extent these events were seen as part and parcel of life in a company town in Appalachia. Yet, nearly a century after the tragedy, the process of unearthing of difficult events can illuminate much of the community's collective history and restore the fragmented communal memory. The memorialization of the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 establishes a framework for acknowledging an arduous past and identifying the roots of a town's resilience.

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The process of conducting community history is delicate, especially in cases where the researcher intends to analyze events that have been laid to rest long before. I recognize that having an outsider show up in the community and begin to ask questions about difficult events in the communal past has the potential of being unsettling, surrounded with uncertainty about intention. For this reason I would like to thank the Town of Saltville, Virginia, for welcoming me, for making available your time and resources, and for being so willing to join me on this journey back into your history. I would like to specifically thank the staff at the Museum of the Middle Appalachians, which became a second home to me on my many trips to Saltville, the staff at the various locations of the Smyth-Bland Regional Library, the faculty and archival staff at Emory & Henry College, and the staff at the Smyth County Museum and Historical Society. I would like to give special thanks to my two oral history subjects, Harry R. Haynes and Herbert V. “Chub” Arnold, both of whom were willing to sit with me and discuss their memories for hours on end. Your contributions to this project cannot be overstated and reminded me of why I enjoy working so closely with the public.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for the continuous support over the past several years. Without you, all of my endeavors—this thesis included—would not be nearly as fulfilling.

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Introduction

**“When twilight fell on Palmer,
It was on Christmas Eve;
When Alkali spread terror,
The people to Deceive.
They thought it was a storm wind,
And rushing to the door;
Were driven back inside,
To never come out any More.”**

-Henrietta Belcher, 1979¹

On the evening of December 24, 1924, a wall of water and alkali muck engulfed Palmertown, a small community of laborers within the larger town of Saltville, in the extreme southwest corner of Virginia. Houses were lifted from their foundations, many torn apart in the process, and by the time all of the bodies were pulled from the wreckage, the death toll reached 19—an immense loss for the tight-knit mountain community. A dam, owned by Mathieson Alkali Works, had loomed approximately 100 feet above Palmertown, keeping at bay the chemical muck the company produced. However, for reasons that remain unclear, the dam collapsed that Christmas Eve, triggering an event that would be remembered alternately as “The Saltville Muck Dam Disaster,” “The Christmas Eve Disaster,” and “The Palmertown Tragedy.” By whatever name, it was the most deadly and destructive dam failure in Virginia history.

¹ Henrietta Belcher, “The Saltville Disaster,” *The Progress*, December 24, 1979.

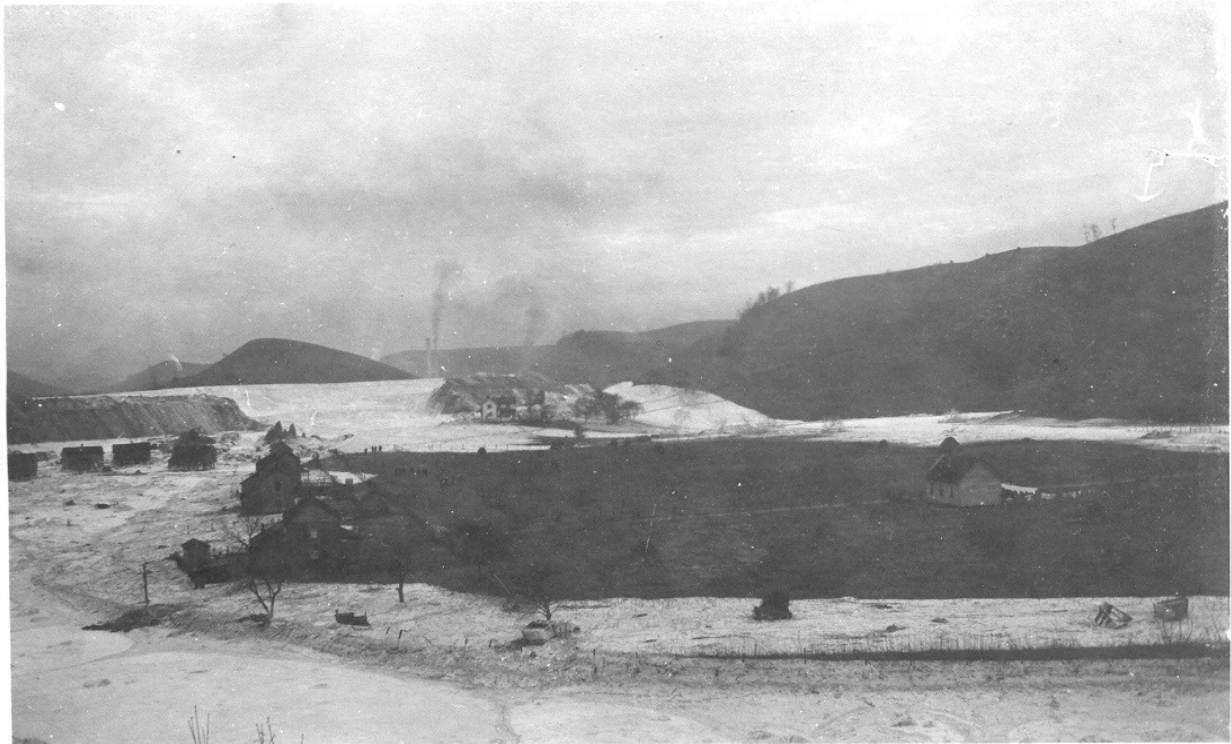


Figure 1: *Muck Dam Disaster, 05*, Saltville, Virginia, 1924. Image from the Carol Rosenbaum Family Photo Collection courtesy of the Museum of the Middle Appalachians Collection. Used with permission. To the top left, the break in the dam—300 feet across and 100 feet high—is visible. The white house directly in front of it was owned by Mr. J.H. Scott. His brother, J.C. “Major” Scott was killed by the initial impact.

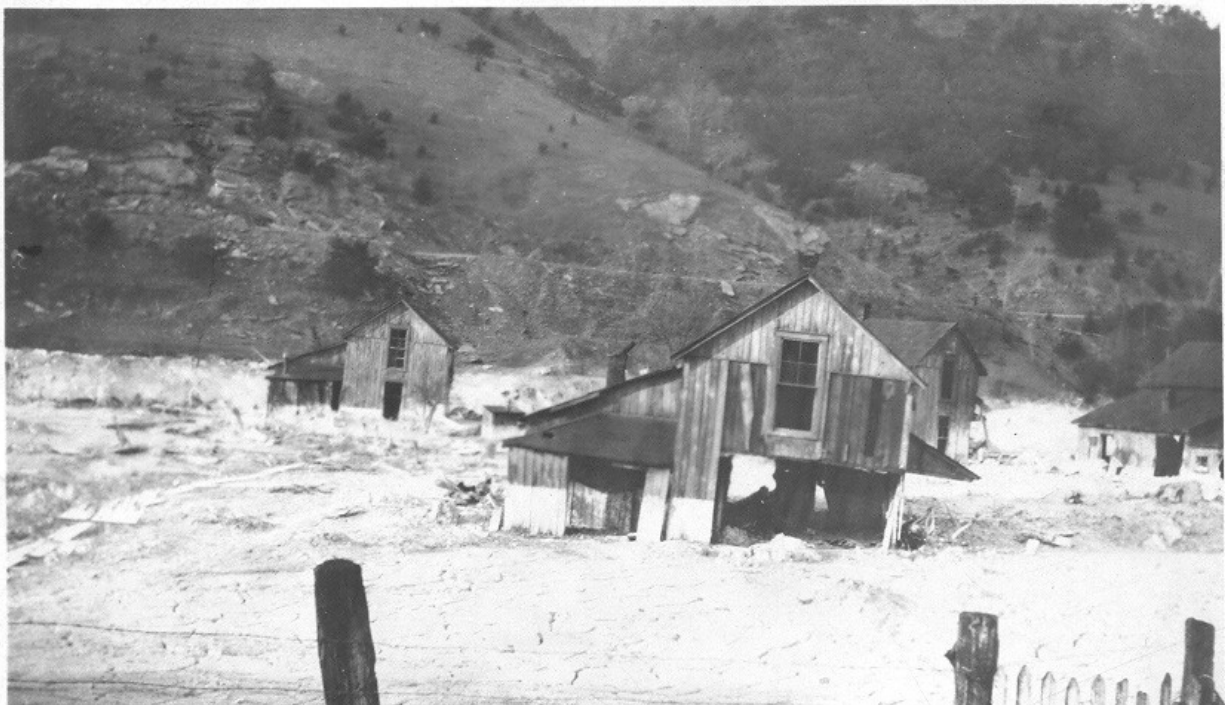


Figure 2: *Muck Dam Disaster, 02*, Saltville, Virginia, 1924. Image from the Carol Rosenbaum Family Photo Collection courtesy of the Museum of the Middle Appalachians Collection. Used with permission. These are some of the homes that were ripped from their foundations and carried downriver in the slurry.



Figure 3: *Muck Dam Disaster, 08, Saltville, Virginia, 1924*. Image from the Carol Rosenbaum Family Photo Collection courtesy of the Museum of the Middle Appalachians Collection. Used with permission.

Despite the extent of the damage, however, the flood is largely absent from discourse on Virginia history, as it is from industrial disaster history or flood history. Saltville is best known as a Civil War site, and while the town's Museum of the Middle Appalachians does have a small exhibit that serves as tribute to the victims of the disaster, it pales in comparison to the exhibits on Saltville's Civil War history or those dedicated to commemorating a long history built upon pillars of salt.² No historical marker exists to memorialize the tragedy. Furthermore, Palmertown and neighboring Henrytown were quite literally wiped off the map in the mid-twentieth century when the Olin Corporation rerouted the Holston River and rebuilt the dam on the site where the towns once stood. Stories of the event have been passed down for generations, immortalizing a

² For more on Saltville during the Civil War, see William Marvel's *The Battles for Saltville: Southwest Virginia in the Civil War* (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, 1992).

specific story of the disaster in the memories of many local residents of Saltville, so why is it not memorialized? The case of the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 is a study of environmental and industrial tragedy, Appalachian labor relations, and both historical memory and historical forgetting.

In this thesis, I use the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 to argue that local understanding and memory-keeping of the dam disaster reflect the larger workings of the “culture of disaster” in the United States. While the debate over the proper definition of disaster is ongoing, for the purposes of this paper, I rely on the definition for disaster culture attributed to anthropologist Gregory Button, who suggests that disasters are, “routine and normal, connected to one another along various social fault lines and a direct product of our culture...”³ Perceptions of disaster have historically reflected common cultural interpretations of the causes of these events—as acts of God, natural disasters, or technological calamity wrought by human action. Different theories of explanation for any given disaster determine the shape that its communal memory takes, and forgetting is a consequence of the rebuilding and recovery processes. What were the public perceptions and explanations of the Palmertown Tragedy at the time of the event, whether local, national, or international? How has the event been written about or remembered in the time since the disaster? How did/do perceptions of this disaster compare to perceptions of other disasters? The answers to these questions illuminate many of the ways in which communities either embrace or repress their disaster history. I maintain that the cultural framework and worldview of Saltville residents at the time of the dam collapse and since contributed to their understandings of the causes and risks of the disaster and their manner of responding to and reckoning with it over time. Cultural understandings determine how and why some events are memorialized—and

³ Gregory Button, *Disaster Culture: Knowledge and Uncertainty in the Wake of Human and Environmental Catastrophe* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010), 17.

why others are not.

Further, my thesis analyzes the ways in which the physical, spatial component of flood memories manifested in Saltville by asking, “How can a tragedy be erased from public memory alongside or through the rebuilding process?” and further “What is gained or sacrificed through such erasure?” The newly merged Mathieson-Olin Chemical Corporation’s decision to rebuild the dam created a tangible means of erasing the towns’ disaster history. For Olin, this process may have been nothing more than a wise business decision. Or perhaps the official burial of Palmertown allowed the company to limit potential judicial repercussions of the dam failure. For the townspeople, however, this removal erased the event by destroying any lasting physical reminder. I contend that both the company and the townspeople were stakeholders in the rebuilding and recovery efforts and the process served as a palpable manifestation of a collective “moving on” from the tragedy. Therefore, the Saltville case study not only explains memory of disaster events but also the formal and informal ways in which they are forgotten.

Joining the Conversation

My thesis uses the lens of cultural history to unite three bodies of historical and interdisciplinary scholarship and to develop new understandings of disaster memory. The first disciplinary approach I rely on is disaster studies in the United States with an emphasis on the development of disaster culture. The second body of work is Appalachian Studies, in which I will focus on labor history within the region, especially as it manifests within company towns. The third is public history and collective memory and the communal processes of both remembering and forgetting. By integrating these three areas of study into my analysis of the Palmertown Tragedy, I am adding a much-needed historical perspective to the conversation on the development of disaster culture and response by providing greater insight into the

connections between disaster culture and memory. Further, I contend that the public historian has an indispensable role in the process of reviving forgotten history, especially in the absence of efforts from within the community of study.

To uncover the details behind the perception of disaster and its effect on memorialization, I first examine the ways in which scholars have considered and defined disaster culture and theories of causation. While many anthropologists have discussed perceptions of disaster culture, few have taken a historical perspective, and even fewer have considered how these perceptions impact community memory. Historical theorists have established frameworks for understanding the interplay of memory and place, yet have often failed to incorporate culture into their methodology. One particular geographer, Kenneth E. Foote, has conducted a full study at the intersection of culture, tragedy, and place. His monograph, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* considers how the cultural framework of America has contributed to tragic events being categorized and subsequently memorialized or forgotten.⁴ His analysis comes the closest to achieving what I wish to in this thesis—a comprehensive study of how culture intimately influences how disaster events are understood, how a community manages the place and memory of the event, and finally, the process through which forgotten events and sites can be resurrected.

As I have already noted, central to studies on disasters are debates over the proper definition of “disaster.” The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies defines disaster as “a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, and economic or environmental losses that

⁴ Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscape of Violence and Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

exceed the community's or society's ability to cope using its own resources.”⁵ Though this working definition of disaster may seem rudimentary for the field of disaster studies, many scholars seeking a more nuanced interpretation have joined the conversation over what makes a disaster “natural”, “unnatural”, or “technological.”⁶ The inability to form consensus on a definition for disaster is a result of differing interpretations of the role of risk and vulnerability, geographic location, level of human manipulation, and cultural ideology.⁷

The development of the term has also evolved through many stages of human understanding of disaster and who or what is to blame. First deemed to be “acts of God,” disaster events were thought to be wrought by the very hands of God as divine retribution for immoral behavior.⁸ By the latter half of the seventeenth century, Mother Nature often replaced God as the central malefactor, a result of a shifting understanding of the natural world and its processes. From the turn of the eighteenth century forward, developments in scientific knowledge and understanding of the mechanics at work in disaster events have implicated humans in these catastrophic happenings.⁹ While modern scholars are perhaps further than ever from agreement

⁵ “What is a disaster?” International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/about-disasters/what-is-a-disaster/>.

⁶ For a more in depth analysis of the evolution of the term, “disaster” and its use within historical scholarship, see Jonathon Bergman, “Disaster: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *History Compass* (2008).

⁷ For a detailed description of contemporary political, demographic, economic, and cultural factors associated with defining disasters, see The Johns Hopkins and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies *Handbook for Emergency Content Overview*, Chapter 1, “Disaster Definitions” (2008).

⁸ Russell R. Dynes, Professor Emeritus at the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware, cites the Biblical flood—the Deluge—as the “central cultural image of disaster for those in the Western World” in “Noah and Disaster Planning: The Cultural Significance of the Flood Story,” *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (December, 2003), 170. According to Biblical tradition, this event, the result of God’s displeasure, resulted in the flooding of the entire world. Though modern science and secular thought introduced the natural world as an agent in its own right during the seventeenth century, the “act of God” argument prevails in some circles, even modern day. See footnote 2, in which Dynes cites the response of Reverend Billy Graham to the Waco Tornado of 1953.

⁹ For more on the development critical understanding of disaster events and who or what has been to blame during different eras of human existence, see Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 33-34. Mulcahy’s primary focus is hurricane history in the American Lowcountry, however, his analysis of human perceptions of disaster events through history has shaped my understanding of Saltville.

on the definition of “disaster,” most identify human action as, if not the central villain, a significant accomplice. In order to establish these definitions, scholars have asked: “Is a disaster still natural if it has been influenced by human action?” “At which point are disasters no longer natural?” and “Who is responsible for disaster?”¹⁰ In the pages that follow I engage the scholars who have answered these questions, focusing not so much on a specific definition, but rather exploring the ground that has (and has not) been covered in an attempt to delineate the “disaster” from the everyday, the “natural” from the “unnatural.”

Methodology:

My methodology falls at the intersection of cultural, environmental, and spatial history. I take an anthropological approach to disaster studies, much like the one outlined by Anthony Oliver-Smith: “In its substantive platform, anthropology as a social science takes into its reckoning the three planes that interface in calamity: the environmental, the biological, and the sociocultural.”¹¹ Approaching my project from an anthropological perspective means that I give special attention to the connections between social or cultural understandings or perceptions of the relationship between humankind and the environment, and more specifically, humankind and disasters.

Chapter Outline:

In Chapter I, I discuss the ways in which Appalachian regionalism and company town paternalism shaped the culture of Saltville and its residents. Significantly, these factors informed

¹⁰ For more on how different scholars of various disciplines have approached these questions and defined “disaster,” see Andrew Baum, Raymond Fleming and Laura M. Davidson, “Natural Disaster and Technological Catastrophe,” *Environment and Behavior* (1983); Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Philip Buckle, “Disaster: Mandated Definitions, Local Knowledge and Complexity,” in *What is a Disaster: New Answers to Old Questions*, ed. Ronald W. Perry and E.L. Quarantelli (New York: Springer New York, 2007).

¹¹ Anthony Oliver-Smith, “What is a Disaster?": Anthropological Perspectives on a Persistent Question.” in *The Angry Earth*, ed. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

the understandings of and the response to the Palmertown Tragedy. I will also analyze the local, regional, national, and international perceptions and “meanings” of the Palmertown Tragedy and the vulnerability of the Appalachian region. Chapter II critically analyzes the state of collective memory and memorialization of the Palmertown Tragedy in Saltville. I will consider the role of news media in creating and maintaining stereotypes and perceptions, as well as its role in creating or buttressing collective memory. The Interlude compares the case study of the Mill River Disaster of 1874 and the actions taken in its aftermath to those taken after the Palmertown Tragedy. Chapter III addresses how a public historian might or should approach a case study such as Saltville. I will emphasize the significance of embracing the entirety of a community’s past and how this process can provide a means of community healing. I will conclude by recommending a plan for a Historical Marker to memorialize the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924.

Significance

My work serves as the next step in historical perspectives of disaster culture by considering how perceptions of disasters influence the ways in which these events are remembered and memorialized.¹² How communities understand and remember disasters certainly influences how they view the more somber moments in their collective past. Comparing the types of events that have been memorialized to those that have been forgotten can illuminate how the community may react to future disasters. Significantly, attempting to resurrect a tragic event and revise previous understandings can positively alter the relationship between the community and their past.

¹² For an overview of the history and development of anthropological perspectives of disaster culture, see Oliver-Smith, “What is a Disaster?”. Also, for a defense of the utility of a historical perspective in disaster studies, see Virginia Garcia-Acosta, “Historical Disaster Research” in *Catastrophe & Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002).

The Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 demonstrates that the Saltville of the twenty-first century has developed out of both the natural and built environment, out of Appalachian culture and outside perceptions, and out of tragedy and triumph. Through Saltville's successes has come confidence and community pride and through its trials, resourcefulness and resilience. An opportunity exists, through appropriately recognizing the Dam Disaster, to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of history and establish a framework for taking ownership of communal past. Such a framework has potential for encouraging other locations far beyond the boundaries of this southern Appalachian town to similarly acknowledge and memorialize their difficult pasts.

This paper is accompanied by a public history component: a proposal for a historical marker to memorialize the Palmertown Tragedy. Significantly, by using disaster history and culture to gain a better understanding of the history of Saltville and its community, I hope to help the community resurrect and redefine local understanding of the town's past. While engaging with this remembered yet unmemorialized event in the town's history may uncover old wounds that have been superficially erased, I argue that it is the public historian's responsibility to reveal both the lighter and darker sides of a community's history and assist in interpreting how this history has shaped a town and its people. In revisiting the Palmertown Tragedy and confronting rather than erasing a difficult history, the community may discover the roots of their resilience, the strength of their people, and the rich seams of their local history.

Chapter I

Culture and Perceptions of Disaster: Appalachian Regionalism and Company Town Paternalism

Salt—what a vital part it has played in the progress of mankind and the history of Saltville! ”Common” salt? Well, perhaps it isn’t so “common” after all.

- William B. Kent, *A History of Saltville, Virginia*¹³

Saltville, Virginia, is a small town nestled amidst the mountains of Smyth County in the southwest portion of the state along the North Fork of the Holston River. Incorporated in 1896 and named for the abundant salt deposits in the area, Saltville’s entire history has been tied to the land beneath it. The town’s old slogan, “Serving America with the salt of the earth” shines light on why, long before the area was surveyed and the town established, humans and animals alike recognized this special place in Appalachia as valuable.¹⁴



Figure 4: *Saltville Valley*, 2016. Image by author.

¹³ William B. Kent, *A History of Saltville, Virginia* (Radford: Commonwealth Press, 1955), 20.

¹⁴ Kimberly Barr Byrd and Debra J. Williams, *Smyth County*, (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 73.

Today, Saltville has a population of approximately 2,077 people within an area of 8.1 miles.¹⁵ The land upon which musk-ox roamed, salt works were established, and Civil War engagements were fought has changed much over the past 14,000 years. The earthen fortifications built to defend Saltville are the only lasting reminder of the First and Second Battles of Saltville, occurring from October 1, 1864 to October 3, 1864, and from December 20, 1864 to December 21, 1864. Gone are the saltworks that had been successfully defended in the Confederate victory of the First Battle, only to be destroyed by Union troops during the Second Battle that decisively cut the Confederacy off from their primary source of salt at the time.¹⁶

¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Demographic Profile, Smyth County, Saltville, 2010,” <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF> (accessed March 10, 2016).

¹⁶ The saltworks held significant importance for the Confederacy, as they produced more salt than the combined production of all other saltworks during this period. For this reason, they were also considered a key strategic target for the Union Army. Part of Brigadier General Stephen Burbridge’s Raid into Southwest Virginia, the First Battle of Saltville lasted from October 1, 1864 to October 3, 1864, during which time each army fought for control of the saltworks, the primary source of salt for the Confederacy at the time. While Union troops under Burbridge attempted to destroy the saltworks, Confederate soldiers under Brigadier General Alfred E. Jackson defended the mineral site, and the battle was a decisive Confederate victory. Union troops reassembled under Major General George Stoneman and, after defeating the Confederate forces at Marion, advanced again to Saltville. The Second Battle of Saltville, occurring from December 20, 1864 to December 21, 1864, saw the tide turn in favor of the Union Army, which defeated the Confederate troops and destroyed the saltworks. Significantly—though the event has been the topic of much debate—after the First Battle of Saltville, Confederate troops imprisoned and murdered black soldiers. I speak briefly on the topic of this event in the final chapter, specifically, about its lack of memorial and open discussion of its historical significance. For more information about the role of Saltville during the Civil War, see Marvel and Billings, *The Battles for Saltville: Southwest Virginia in the Civil War* (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, 1992).



Figure 5: *Welcome to Scenic Saltville, Salt Capital of the Confederacy, Saltville, Virginia, 2016.* Image by author. This sign, along with Historical Highway Markers, captures for posterity Saltville’s role in the Civil War.

What has not changed, however, is the connection of the valley’s residents to their environment. Through hell and high water, industrial accident and shutdown, and economic boom and bust, Saltville has persisted, still standing, and with a story to tell. However, not every story of Saltville’s history is readily told, and some have even been nearly forgotten, left behind to join with the salt of the earth—not immediately seen, but ever-present.

Significantly, the Saltville of the twenty-first century is not entirely unlike the Saltville of the early-twentieth, at least as far as relative geographical and residential size are concerned. The population of Saltville during the 1920s was approximately 2,248 individuals spread out through the various suburbs of the central town: Perryville, Henrytown, and Palmertown.¹⁷ The North Fork of the Holston meandered along by the town much in the same way it does now, yet along a

¹⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Demographic Profile, Smyth County, Saltville, 1920,” <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF> (accessed March 10, 2016).

slightly different track—years before it would be rerouted to accommodate Mathieson Alkali Work’s expanded dams and holding ponds. However, whereas the river can now be seen, clear and sparkling, from a vantage point on Perryville Road, in 1924 the same view would have been obstructed by enormous holding ponds containing alkali slurry—a direct byproduct of the production of sodium bicarbonate for the purposes of soda ash, baking soda, and caustic soda.

The absence of this industry, so central to the success of Saltville during the twentieth-century, may be the most obvious difference between the town modern-day and that of nearly 100 years ago. In 1924 Mathieson was omnipresent, employing a majority of the population and serving all through its housing, medical and educational resources, company store, and recreational activities. The company’s presence in Saltville in 1924, along with the town’s Appalachian roots, helped establish a cultural framework within which the community operated. This framework dictated how citizens responded to the familiar highs and lows of the industrial era. The community was fortunate in experiencing far more boom than bust during this early period. Yet, as is common with extractive industry and all the more common in a region so rich in natural resources, lows often manifested in the form of industrial accidents. Especially in mines, accidents were endemic and death occurred often.¹⁸ Dam failures, while less common in the area, were also a potential hazard. Thus, when the Muck Dam broke on Christmas Eve, 1924, Saltville residents were forced to acknowledge an event that had incontrovertible ties to their cultural foundations.

Local people, journalists, and their readers across the nation attempted to make sense of the disaster—its causes, effects, and how to move forward in the aftermath. The very first reports of the Palmertown Tragedy presented the local communities with the small amount of

¹⁸ “All Mining Disasters: 1839 to Present,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/mining/statistics/content/allminingdisasters.html>. Hundreds of miners met their deaths in Virginia mines, alone.

information that could be gathered amidst the chaos and confusion: The Muck Dam owned by the Mathieson Alkali Works in Saltville, Virginia, had failed, sending a wall of water cascading toward the houses of company employees. The failure was a result of heavy rains and pressure on the dam. A number of people were injured and five were initially confirmed dead. These were the facts.¹⁹ Or at least, what the town of Saltville and surrounding communities perceived to be true. However, in the days and months that followed, what seemed to be verifiable truth in the wake of disaster became increasingly unclear.

The shared experience of the dam disaster and its aftermath are the central concerns of this chapter. However, the event occurred within and at the crossroads of geographical, temporal, and intellectual systems that directly influenced how Saltville residents themselves perceived the disaster from the inside. These perceptions, ultimately, provide insight into the broader culture of disaster within the United States in which those impacted establish meaning out of tragedy based on their own cultural framework.

Explanations of Disaster

Theories explaining the dam failure that were captured in the local press in the immediate aftermath of the breach suggest that locals believed the event to have been caused by the natural world. On the day following the disaster, *The Roanoke Times* printed an article stating that, “Heavy rains of the last day or two and the consequent increased pressure on the dam are said to have been responsible for the disaster.”²⁰ Three days later, the *Bristol Herald Courier* printed: “the cause of the disaster was attributed to the fact that recent rains added great pressure to the

¹⁹ “Five Lives Lost When Dam At Saltville Breaks,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, December 25, 1924, final edition.

²⁰ “Five Killed When Dam Bursts on Holston River at Saltville,” *The Roanoke Times*, December 25, 1924, final edition.

tons of muck which caused it to soften and break loose.”²¹ In the weeks that followed, theories regarding the ways in which nature had given way, resulting in the event, surfaced. On January 8, an article in the *Marion News* pointed to a “subterraneous crack beneath the dam” as the most likely explanation for the event:

The lower end of the dam where it broke was stated to be the strongest point, about 125 feet thick and constructed of stone and earth and cemented with the ground limestone. The muck solidified after its deposit and apparently became hard as stone for a depth of some 60 or more feet, which made the breaking of the dam the more remarkable and less plausible. No satisfactory explanation of the break can be made. It can only be conjectural. Perhaps the most plausible theory is that there was a subterraneous crack beneath the dam and the great weight of the solidified muck broke through into the cavernous opening below and cracked the dam as it sunk at the point where it broke into the river.²²

Yet, despite the identification of natural causes as striking the match that ignited the disaster, it is also clear that the community recognized the dam was unsuccessful in its single duty—to contain the muck. How can we account for such an explanation that is more multifaceted and multicausal than merely implicating Mother Nature in the crime? By outlining a few contemporary descriptions or explanations of disasters more generally, perhaps light can be shed on the ways in which the Saltville community perceived and understood the dam collapse.

In “Natural Disaster and Technological Catastrophe,” authors Andrew Baum, Raymond Fleming, and Laura M. Davidson provide a definition of a disaster event in which human manipulation of nature is to blame. They describe “technological catastrophes” as “events that are human made in that they are accidents, failures, or mishaps involving the technology and manipulation of the natural environment that we have created to support our living.”²³ In retrospect, by this definition the Palmertown Tragedy would be considered a technological

²¹ “Funeral Is Held For Several Who Died In Saltville’s Disaster,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, December 28, 1924, final edition.

²² “The Great Saltville Disaster,” *Marion News*, January 8, 1924, final edition.

²³ Andrew Baum, Raymond Fleming and Laura M. Davidson, “Natural Disaster and Technological Catastrophe,” *Environment and Behavior* (1983): 334.

disaster because a human-constructed dam, established to contain a human-manufactured slurry of alkali chemicals mixed with water, failed. However, this definition is almost too simple to fully represent understandings of the event that occurred in Saltville. Accounts attributing causality in the wake of the disaster pointed first to the natural world, suggesting that it was the environment that had forsaken the town, rather than the company, which had altered the environment in the first place. There is no acknowledgement, for instance, that a river swollen with rainwater but unimpeded by a dam would not have damaged the town. The technological catastrophe that was the dam failure cannot be separated from the relationships that existed between the alkali industry, the residents of Palmertown, and the land upon which the town and plants were developed.

Where Baum et al fail to consider the relationship between the ruling and the ruled, historian Ted Steinberg offers a new framework for understanding the relationship between the company and the community in Saltville and how this relationship shaped understandings of the tragedy. In *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, Steinberg claims that the political or corporate elite have intentionally promoted the idea of disaster events as being entirely natural and therefore beyond human control (despite the human manipulations that exacerbate impacts and highlight vulnerabilities).²⁴ Steinberg's analysis is applicable to the case of the Palmertown Tragedy in several ways. First, it is difficult to know whether or not the information conveyed in local media was provided by or filtered through Mathieson prior to going to press. Given that the company owned everything from the General Store to the hospital to the golf course, it stands to reason that it would have had a certain level of control over the

²⁴ Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), xiv.

information entering and exiting Saltville.²⁵ Second, according to local papers, historians, and funeral records, the company was exceptionally willing to assist in rescue and relief efforts, to provide financial aid, and to help the survivors pick up the pieces after the flood.²⁶ An article in the *Marion News* described this altruism, stating: “All the families of the stricken employees have been generously and voluntarily provided for, though the company felt that the disaster was not the result of any [malfunctioning] part and could not have been foreseen or prevented.”²⁷ The article goes on to claim that “[Mathieson] has always been managed in the interest of the community and no company was ever more considerate of its employees. After the disaster every possible thing was done for the bereaved families and the injured ones that money and ease and labor could command.”²⁸ Thus the newspaper absolved the company even as it described the immediate events and their aftermath.

Again, it is difficult to know if this article was written or reviewed by the company, *or* if the power dynamics at play dissuaded representations to the contrary. If Mathieson did in fact control what information was going to press, then Steinberg’s suggestion that those in power intentionally classify such disasters as beyond human control is particularly useful. And Mathieson persisted in this characterization even though breaks in the dam had been recorded in the notebook of Mathieson engineer Palmer St. Clair a decade prior to the disaster—June 12, 1910 and another time “early in spring.” This evidence indicates the company had prior knowledge of a potential failure of the dam.²⁹ However, as this information was most likely

²⁵ Martha A. Turnage, *Company Town Shutdown* (Annapolis: Berwick Publishing, 1994), 1-5; Henry E. Diggs, *Growing Up in a Company Town: Saltville, Virginia, 1930-1944* (Saltville: Museum of the Middle Appalachians, 2012), 2-19.

²⁶ Morris Funeral Home Funeral Records, VITAL Repository. Certified copy in possession of Smyth-Bland Regional Library Digital Collection; following the disaster, Mathieson financed the funerals of the deceased.

²⁷ “The Great Saltville Disaster,” *Marion News*, January 8, 1925, final edition.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Palmer St. Clair, “Data M.A. Works,” 1906.

unknown to the greater Saltville community, the company was able to “cry nature.” Regardless, articles that convey the humanitarianism of the company reveal local perceptions that Mathieson was integrally bound up in the events of the disaster, at least in the cleanup, if not in its very cause.

Finally, Mathieson was perfectly content with identifying a human culprit, just not one within the company. Roy Patrick, a 27-year old man from Marion, Virginia, was held on charges for dynamiting the dam in response to those who “have it in for him” at the Alkali Works.³⁰ Even after the proposed scapegoat was absolved of any charges, Mathieson took financial responsibility, paying approximately \$2,000 in damages, but never faced any charges of its own.³¹

However, pointing the finger at a human agent carries significantly heavier implications than accusing a non-human culprit. These ramifications went far beyond the potential charges that the offender might face if found guilty. It was easy enough to blame the natural world for the event, as such would chalk up the disaster as an occurrence or risk that could potentially happen any given day. Yet, if the blame were to fall on the company, how could the victims seek justice? Everything within the town—down to the very houses that were inundated by the flood—was company owned. Accurately determining the cause of the Palmertown Tragedy and navigating its aftermath would have required the Saltville community to critically consider their relationships both to their natural environment and their built environment provided and largely controlled by Mathieson.

Discussions of blame for the Palmertown Tragedy offer up a number of potential reasons for the historic silence within the community regarding the event once outside coverage had died

³⁰ “Charged With Blowing Dam,” *Marion Democrat*, January 20, 1925, final edition.

³¹ *Grand Jury’s Report*, Law Order Book No. 10, page 65, Smyth County Courthouse, Marion, Virginia.

down. First, if truly seen as a natural event, the disaster would have been considered one of the risks associated with living day-to-day life. In such a case, there is no scapegoat, no one to charge or blame, and the most logical course of action would seem to be to move forward in any way possible. Next, if there were any suspicion regarding the role of the company in covering up technological failure, few sources can offer corroborative evidence. Even so, if fingers were to point toward Mathieson, what could have been done? Within a town in which every good and service, not to mention nearly every job, was provided by the company, what individual would risk his or her livelihood in order to bring such a mammoth criminal to justice? Further, as previously stated, Mathieson covered the financial costs of the disaster, as well as the funerals of the deceased.³² Would the justice and potential closure that could be offered in court be worth the lawsuit? And further, if a lawsuit were ever in the minds of the Saltville community, it is of interest that of all of the amenities offered by Mathieson Alkali Works, a lawyer was not among them.

Thus, if the above discussion of explanations of disaster cannot fully solve the mystery of the lack of memorialization of the Palmertown Tragedy, perhaps most useful for an analysis of perceptions of disaster within the Saltville community is Philip Buckle's argument that the perceptions and understandings of local people most impacted by disaster events are shaped by concerns over social change:

For local people a disaster was any event or process that significantly disrupted local daily life and which jeopardized the future...For local people unwanted change, however it was caused, was damaging and disastrous. But long term social change was feared more than events such as floods and wildfires because the social depth and the

³² Morris Funeral Home Funeral Records, VITAL Repository. Certified copy in possession of Smyth-Bland Regional Library Digital Collection. It is worth noting that the \$2,000 given toward the recovery effort by Mathieson, it appears that this money was directed at cleanup, relocation of the displaced, and the burial of the deceased. I have found no record that suggests the company offered any further compensation for loss of life.

comprehensiveness of change was significantly greater for the continued well-being and the future of the community.³³

Application of Buckle's argument suggests that, despite the initial shock and loss, the town did not consider this event to be as detrimental to its survivability as much as an event that would have resulted in continued strain on the community and its well being. As we will see in Chapter II, the economic disaster that occurred as a result of the closing of Olin Corporation in the 1970s would be perceived as a much heavier blow to Saltville society and, not coincidentally, is far less absent in historical record and exhibition and far more present in daily conversations.

Though public perception of blame helps elucidate possible reasons for the historical forgetting of the Palmertown Tragedy, causes for memorialization or the lack thereof cannot be understood merely in terms of blame. In order to understand why and how the event has been remembered or forgotten, other factors concerning the identity and community of Saltville residents have to be considered.

Appalachian Regionalism

The location of Smyth County in the Southwestern portion of Virginia places it within the Appalachian Mountain Region, bordering the counties that make up the "Heart of the Appalachians." Historian Henry D. Shapiro provides a "history of the idea of Appalachia, and hence the invention of Appalachia" in his 1978 work, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*.³⁴ In his influential work, Shapiro argues: "The emergence of this idea [a distinct Appalachia], between 1870 and 1900, involved an attempt to understand reality, or more precisely reality perceived in a particular way from a particular point of view, and it seeks to explicate the manner in which the

³³ Philip Buckle, "Disaster: Mandated Definitions, Local Knowledge and Complexity," in *What is a Disaster: New Answers to Old Questions*, ed. Ronald W. Perry and E.L. Quarantelli (New York: Springer New York, 2007), 191.

³⁴ Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), ix.

idea of Appalachia came to be used as a way of dealing with the strange land and peculiar people of the southern mountains.”³⁵

This attempt to understand the region came from outside of it—from politicians seeking to make sense and use of the area and from journalists and Protestant missionaries who saw the region as backwards and in need of assistance to rescue it from the clutches of developmental delay.³⁶ As Shapiro knew then and as scholars continue to discuss today, the region of Appalachia cannot be described in simplified terms—neither its environment nor its towns nor its peoples are homogenous.³⁷ Yet, despite the insufficiency or general inaccuracy of the terms “Appalachia” or “Appalachian” for understanding the region, the projection of a distinct Appalachia based on “otherness” during the late nineteenth century did take hold. Inaccurate as they were, declarations of distinctness partially established an “us versus them” mentality that served as a superficial boundary between Appalachia and everything else. This boundary was often as difficult to navigate as the roughest terrain in the Appalachian Mountains. Since 1870, the idea of a unique Appalachia has permeated both regional and outside understandings of the area and can be seen in discourse and media both within Appalachia and from beyond its ambiguous borders. The idea of Appalachia outlined by Shapiro is useful in helping to understand the contemporary responses printed in local and national news sources that covered the dam disaster.

At the same time that “local color” writers and missionaries sought to define Appalachia, they also endeavored to envision community within the region, attempts that may actually have reified that very sense of community:

³⁵ Ibid, ix.

³⁶ Ibid, xiv.

³⁷ For further discussion on the topic of Appalachian Identity, see Barbara Ellen Smith et al. “Appalachian Identity: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Appalachian Journal*, Vol 38. No. 1 (Fall 2010): 56-76.

At the heart of the concept of community lay the concept of culture--a set of habits, traditions, technologies, patterns of speech, customs, a mythology, a sense of shared experience, a history. Culture was the common possession of members of the community, by which they defined themselves to themselves as different from outsiders, and by which they might in turn themselves be defined by outsiders...The establishment of viable mountain community thus turned on the possibility of discovering a common culture which the mountaineers had forgotten, or of identifying common elements which might serve as the basis for the creation of a culture for Appalachia.³⁸

In the minds of those defining the region, belief in the existence of Appalachian community and culture were undoubtedly integral in attempts to justify assistance to and enact the uplift of Appalachia while still maintaining its supposed distinctness. A key part of the project to uplift, according to Shapiro, was to “[establish] among the mountain people a sense of their own Appalachianism and of their distinct if not unique patterns of mountain culture.”³⁹ If the missionaries and local color writers were misled in their attempts to help the region and incorrectly generalized the culture of an entire geographical area, pieces of their construction of region can still be of use. The way in which the Saltville community experienced and remembered the disaster was similar to that of other communities within Appalachia during this time, each of which was a company town that experienced tragedy that was integrally tied up in resource exploitation. However, before I analyze how the idea of Appalachia and its unique culture manifested throughout the region, I must take a look at how this idea was illustrated within accounts of the Palmertown Tragedy—both the “insider” perspective and that of the “outsider.”

Newspaper articles are a key source in identifying local, regional, national, and international perceptions of the Palmertown Tragedy. Significantly, word of the dam break spread almost as quickly as the alkali muck, finding its way into papers all along the east coast

³⁸ Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*, 216.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 216.

and as far away as Ontario, Canada. The articles that surfaced in local newspapers in the days and weeks following the tragedy were emotionally charged, focusing on details regarding the deceased and stories of heroism during the rescue effort. The *Bristol Herald Courier*, reporting approximately forty miles southwest of Saltville, noted on December 27th that the death toll had risen to fourteen and that “eight persons still are missing and more than twenty are being treated in the emergency hospital established in the commissary building here.”⁴⁰ Further, the *Courier* reported that, “A mother, fighting only as a mother can, saved her baby by holding it aloft and battling her precarious way through deep muck to safety. She collapsed after gaining shore.”⁴¹ Similarly, on January 7th, the *Marion Democrat*, reporting approximately twenty miles northeast of Saltville, published an article that recounted “a remarkable story” in which the son, daughter-in-law, and young grandchild of Reverend D. R. Fuller of Sullivan Co. survived the flood by clinging to “a 16-foot length of timber that was floating near the door...they drifted out into the darkness with the onrushing sea of muck growing in volume...After they had drifted a distance, later ascertained to have been over 300 yards, in to the Holston River, Mrs. Fuller, with the babe in one hand, managed to grab an overhanging limb. This brought the raft to a stop.”⁴² The articles published by local news stories highlighted resilience in the wake of disaster, rather than victimization. In *Together by Accident: American Local Color Literature and the Middle Class*, Stephanie C. Palmer suggests that this type of account of disaster was not unusual during America’s Gilded Age, as “survivors were not always immediately overcome by a sense of their

⁴⁰ “Death Toll In Disaster at Saltville Mounts to 14,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, December 27, 1924, final edition.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Rescued From Muck Flood,” *Marion Democrat*, January 7, 1925, final edition.

own hubris. They often wrote literature and histories that praised the community of good feeling born in the disaster and expressed sympathy for the victims...⁴³

The stories divulged in these two local newspapers similarly reflect the sense of shared experience that forms a key part of the definition of culture as outlined by Shapiro. Further, the importance of community is evident in the articles, as, drawn together by common tragedy and loss, Saltville community members headed up rescue and relief efforts, erected emergency hospitals and shelters, and mourned together.⁴⁴ Contrastingly, a vast majority of the news media covering the Palmertown Tragedy came from outside of the region. This is not unusual, as “Opposition, accidents, and scandals all provide the opportunity for news coverage which could include information normally shielded from everyday understandings of the social order...indeed, crisis stories regularly focus the nation’s attention on Appalachia.”⁴⁵ However, it is curious that, “the coverage tends to be on the crisis and human misery, not on the causes of such recurrent tragedies as mine disasters and flooding.”⁴⁶ Regrettably, this information often acted as the first introduction that the vast majority of Americans reading the daily news had to Saltville, Virginia, thus shaping the understandings of the national populace. This process through which “the media bring people their concepts, symbols, images of heroines and heroes, emotional charges, definitions of public values, and directional information” and simultaneously “shape definitions of reality” is a form of “cultural hegemony.”⁴⁷ In her article, “Cultural Hegemony: The News Media in Appalachia,” Sally Ward Maggard suggests that cultural

⁴³ Stephanie C. Palmer, *Together by Accident: American Local Color Literature and the Middle Class*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 25.

⁴⁴ *Bristol Herald Courier, Marion Democrat*, December 25, 1924-January 1925, Newspapers.com, accessed 2015.

⁴⁵ Sally Ward Maggard, “Cultural Hegemony: The News Media and Appalachia,” *Appalachian Journal*, Vol. 11, No. ½ (1983-84): 78. Put simply, cultural hegemony refers to the process through which the ruling or dominant class work to impose their culture on society, establishing a perception of the world that is based entirely on the culture of the dominant class.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

hegemony manifests in two primary styles: “On the one hand, inaccurate reporting and a lack of serious in-depth analysis dominate news and feature stories on the region. On the other hand, the region is so stereotypically described as ‘hillbilly-land’ that most Americans, including journalists, are hooked on cartoon images portraying debilitating distinctiveness.”⁴⁸ In the case of the Palmertown Tragedy, national news reports tended to resemble the former, featuring bold titles and sensationalized rhetoric. Further, much of the information relayed by papers outside of the region was provided by either *The Associated Press* or *The United Press*. Interestingly, *The Roanoke Times*, *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, *The Danville Bee*, and *The Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, all within relatively close proximity to Saltville (though more than fifty miles away versus twenty or forty), did not seem to dispatch their own reporters but seemed to predominantly receive their information from the AP as well.⁴⁹ The descriptions of Saltville and the event differed in several key ways from those in immediately local papers such as the *Marion Democrat* or the *Bristol Herald Courier*.

First, while the number dead and injured remained speculative in the days following the event in even the most local of papers, information gathered and distributed by the AP or UP often presented unreliable and even blatantly incorrect accounts of the event. For example, of the families impacted by the flood, the Prater family took the heaviest blow with six dead. The first of the deceased to be identified, Mrs. Harry Prater, was continuously referred to as “Mrs. Harry Traitor” in *The Billings Gazette* from Billings, Montana, the *Times Signal* out of Zanesville, Ohio, *The Scranton Republican* of Pennsylvania, and a variety of other sources.⁵⁰ Other articles

⁴⁸ Ibid, 72.

⁴⁹ *The Bee*, *The Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, *The Roanoke Times*, *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, December 25, 1924-January 1925, Newspapers.com, accessed 2015.

⁵⁰ Associated Press, “15 Probably Dead in Dam’s Break, Waters Sweep Families Away in Night Rush,” *The Billings Gazette*, December 26, 1924, Newspapers.com, accessed October 8, 2015; Associated Press, “Death List in this Disaster is 12 and it May Be Score,” *Times Signal*, December 26, 1924, Newspapers.com, accessed October 8,

released by the AP referred to Palmertown as “Parmartown.”⁵¹ While these errors within the text may be indicative of issues in telegraph transmission or the urgency of getting sensationalized information to press in the age of the Associated Press’s ascendancy, it is nonetheless apparent that it was more important that the events were sent to press *first* rather than *accurately*.⁵²

Additionally, AP and UP descriptions of Saltville and Palmertown depicted the town as a “village,” a “mill settlement” and “the little hamlet.”⁵³ The various names and descriptions given to Palmertown are pejorative and belittling, indicative of how nonlocal sources were unfamiliar with the town, and thus reporters fell back on what was been deemed as common knowledge regarding the region. Immediately following a period during which, “the establishment of schools, churches, industrial facilities, urban centers, and the agencies of local government appeared not merely as the fulfillment of an obvious ‘need’, but as ways of providing the crucial institutions through which the mountaineers might participate in the ‘normal’ patterns of American life” throughout much of the South, Appalachian and Southern towns that contained new industry fell under the title of “mill town.”⁵⁴ Certainly, cotton manufacturing became a predominant industry throughout the South and the coal seams of the Appalachian Mountains were being exploited beginning in the late nineteenth century, but knowledge of the myriad industries of the region and which towns produced what resources was of less concern than the confirmation that industry of some fashion was being introduced as a solution to the “mountain

2015; Associated Press, “Residents of Mill Town Trapped as Muck Dam Fails,” *The Scranton Republican*, December 26, 1924, Newspapers.com, accessed October 27, 2015.

⁵¹ Associated Press, “23 Killed and Many Homeless in a Dam Break,” *The Lincoln Star*, December 25, 1924, Newspapers.com, accessed October 27, 2015; United Press, “Christmas Means Many Fatalities,” *Altoona Mirror*, December 26, 1924, Newspapers.com, accessed October 27, 2015.

⁵² Jonathon Siberstein-Loeb, *International Distribution of News: The Associated Press, Press Association, and Peuters, 1848-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 46.

⁵³ Associated Press, “Flood Toll is 15 When Dam Bursts,” *Wilmington News-Journal*, December 26, 1924, Newspapers.com, accessed October 8, 2015; Associated Press, “Toll in Flood as Dam Breaks May Reach 15,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, December 26, 1924, Newspaper.com, accessed October 8, 2015; United Press, “Christmas Means Many Fatalities,” *Altoona Mirror*, December 26, 1924, Newspapers.com, accessed October 27, 2015.

⁵⁴ Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*, 161.

problem.”⁵⁵ Arguably, it was for this reason that the Associated Press and the papers that benefitted from its journalism glossed over the details of the Mathieson Alkali Work’s production and located the community under the umbrella descriptor, “mill town.”

Finally, and perhaps most suggestive of outside perceptions of Saltville as a “strange land and peculiar people,” is the following article by the Associated Press out of Richmond, Virginia, as published in *The Lincoln Star*:

Saltville, the scene of the Christmas eve flood, although little known to the world outside of its Blue Ridge mountain walls, has played an important and peculiar part in history. It was Saltville that gave the armies of the Confederacy their chief salt supply when that commodity was at a premium in the blockaded South...the properties saw the beginning of their modern development during the war between states when each southern state established a kettle there...⁵⁶

This article, while attributing significant successes to Saltville in assisting in the Confederate cause and making an important mark on history, also identifies the area as “peculiar” or distinct from surrounding areas. Determining whether or not the distinction groups Saltville *with* Appalachia or as *apart* from it would be a matter of speculation. But if the role of this small, southern town had been so significant during the Civil War, why should the nation need to be reminded of it, hardly a half-century following its end? Thus, based on this article and others presenting the events of December 24, 1924, it seems safe to suggest that though possibly distinguishing itself during the Civil War, Saltville, as understood and portrayed in national media, was not complex or significant at all.

Company Town Paternalism

⁵⁵ Ibid, 162.

⁵⁶ Shapiro, ix; Associated Press, “23 Killed and Many Homeless in a Dam Break,” *The Lincoln Star*, December 25, 1924, Newspapers.com, accessed October 27, 2015.

Just as the understandings of the Palmertown Tragedy were bound up in the idea of Appalachia, analysis of labor history is imperative to understanding the relationship between Mathieson Alkali Works and the Saltville community, and thus local perceptions of the disaster.

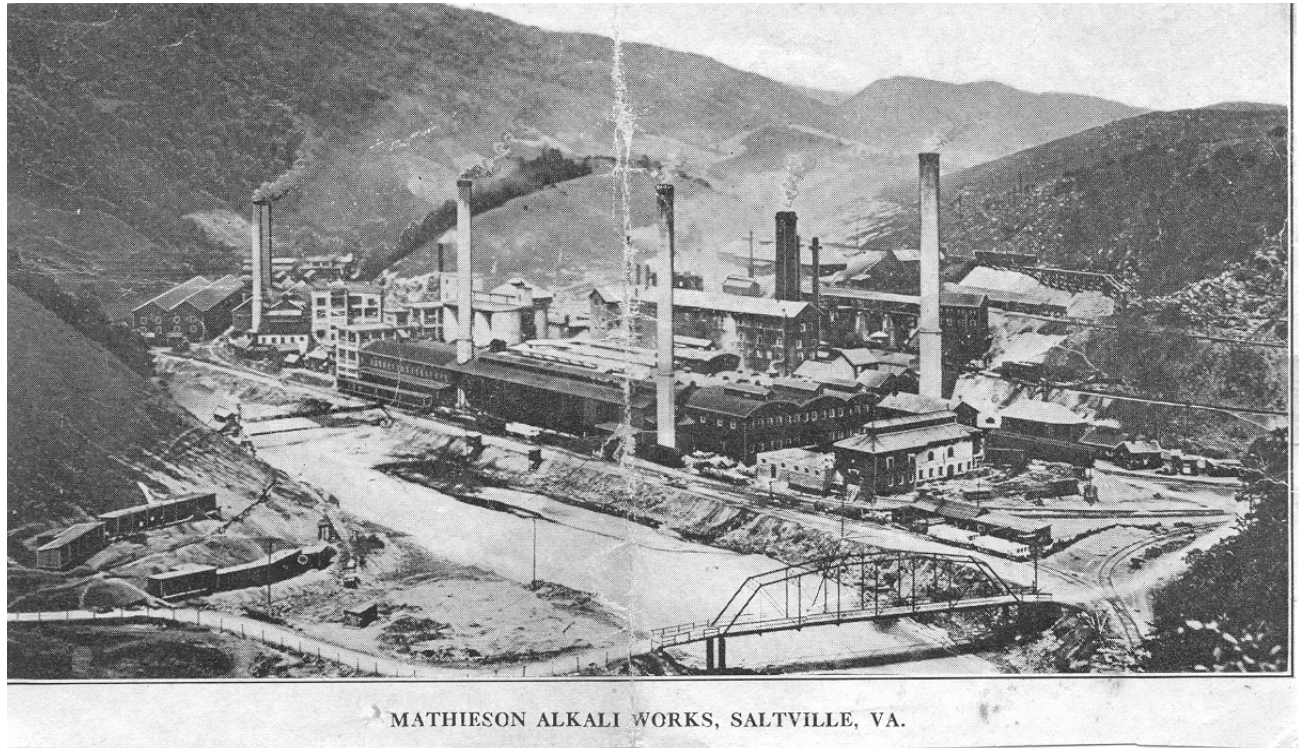


Figure 6: *Main Plant, Saltville, Virginia. 1920s.* Image courtesy of the Museum of the Middle Appalachians Collection. Used with permission. Image from postcard depicts what Mathieson Alkali Works looked like circa 1920. The North Fork of the Holston river meanders along in front of the plant site.

Company towns, “born in the 1880s, the child of necessity and boom” became the system around which the lives of thousands of Appalachian mountaineers structured their lives at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁷ Defined by historians Marcelo J. Borges and Susana B. Torres as “residential and service centers built by companies near or adjacent to the places of extraction or production in which companies operated not only as employers but also as landlords, as de facto enforcers of security and social harmony, and often as providers of services and good for workers’ consumption,” these sites were “prime sites of paternalism and welfare practices” and

⁵⁷ John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 162.

“contested terrains of negotiations and confrontations between capital and labor.”⁵⁸ Though the intricacies of company town life and power relations differed from town to town, traditionally, scholars understand company towns as oppressive and cruel locations where workers become enslaved to the capitalist system of Big Business. In *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, political sociologist John Gaventa outlines the multiple dimensions of power relationships between elites and non-elites in Central Appalachia, arguing, “the quietness of this segment of America’s lower and working class perceived at a distance cannot be taken to reflect consensus to their condition or seen to be innate within their socio-economic or cultural circumstances. As one draws closer, in fact, the silence is not as pervasive as it appears...”⁵⁹ Though Gaventa offers an explanation as to why those at the bottom of the Appalachian power structure have often been hesitant to rebel against an oppressive power, he does not address the possibility of a power dynamic in which the needs and wants of a company and the community do not stand in stark contrast. Is it possible that a community *welcomes* the presence of a company, perceiving their presence as an improvement upon quality of life?

Such would seem to be the case in when looking at news media coming out of Saltville at the time of the disaster. Local media and townspeople were not silent on the topic of big business, referring to Mathieson Alkali Works highly, and emphasizing the exceptional treatment received by the community. An article in the *Bristol Herald Courier* published four days after the event stated: “[...] a corps of doctors and nurses have been working tirelessly in the emergency hospital which was provided by the Mathieson Company. The company has been

⁵⁸ Marcelo J. Borges and Susana B. Torres, “Company Towns: Concepts, Historiography, and Approaches.” In *Company Towns: Labor, Space, and Power Relations Across Time and Continents*, ed. Marcelo J. Borges and Susana B. Torres. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

⁵⁹ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 252.

doing everything in its power to speed up the rescue work and relieve suffering.”⁶⁰ Similarly, minutes from a meeting of the Saltville Civic League held in January, 1925, reveal resolutions made by the league following the event, including:

Fifth. That we most highly commend the General Manager of the Mathieson Alkali Works, and all the officials and employees of this company, who gave their entire time to the distressed, and who spared neither work nor expense in comforting the injured and grief stricken people and in bestowing tributes to the dead.⁶¹

Indeed, the gratitude expressed by the Saltville community toward Mathieson in the wake of the disaster reveals a more nuanced relationship between the company and the town. Perhaps Saltville was more in line with the “utopian town” outlined by Hardy Green in *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills that Shaped the American Economy*. Green’s description of “Ideal communities backed by companies that promise to share their bounty with workers and their families...characterized by modern public buildings, libraries and facilities for leisure, education, and cultural enrichment, and comfortable dwellings for managers and workers” seems to accurately outline the framework within which Mathieson and Saltville were understood.⁶² Significantly, according to contemporary Saltville historian Carl V. Eskridge, as soon as the two hundred men working the alkali plant heard of the disaster, “it needed no explanation, no questions, no urging, every man understood; and within less time than it takes to relate, the plant was deserted of employees,” all of which had gone to assist in the rescue effort.⁶³ The actions of the company in the wake of this disaster and the lack of judicial action suggest

⁶⁰ “Funeral is Held for Several Who Died in Saltville’s Disaster,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, December 28, 1924, final edition.

⁶¹ As published in the *Marion Democrat*, “Saltville Civic League Meeting,” *Marion Democrat*, January 20, 1925, final edition.

⁶² Hardy Green, *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills That Shaped the American Economy* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 5.

⁶³ Carl V. Eskridge, *The Great Saltville Disaster*, ed. Jerry W. Catron (1925, 1991), 7.; For more on the role of Mathieson in the rescue and relief effort, see *Bristol Herald Courier*, “Death Toll in Disaster at Saltville Mounts to 14,” December 27, 1924, and *Marion News*, “The Great Saltville Disaster,” January 8, 1925.

that the relationship between Mathieson and the Saltville community was more reflective of affinity or loyalty than contention.

Oral histories also corroborate the notion of the perception of a benevolent company. When interviewed as part of the Saltville Oral History Project conducted by Emory and Henry students in 2008, a cross section of the modern-day Saltville community reflected on personal or inherited memories of the company's heyday.⁶⁴ David R. Henderson II maintained that the company "played such a big part in so many of the activities in town, everything from the sports to the churches, just the community all—you know—they had supplied prior to my time, all the schools and hospitals and things," while high schools students Natasha Olinger and Ryan Comer recalled their grandparents telling them that "back in the day...Saltville was the place to be" and that it was "a boomtown...back in the golden age..."⁶⁵ While the reflections of the interviewees only date back to mid-century, the roots of the relationship between community and company began in the early-twentieth century, when the influence of Mathieson Alkali Works pervaded all levels of Saltville society. Suffice to say, the impression of Mathieson as an altruistic business in Saltville helped shape the ways in which community members have remembered the disaster.

However, to suggest the relations between the company and the community were amicable is not to propose that Mathieson was undoubtedly the model of altruism or benevolence. Indeed, the efforts of the company to construct educational, recreational, and healthcare facilities within the town cannot be taken as mere generosity. In fact, this behavior was common among company towns during the period between World War I and the Great

⁶⁴ *The Saltville Oral History Project*. Emory and Henry Kelly Library. Emory and Henry College, Emory, VA.

⁶⁵ David R. Henderson II, interview by Erica Hess, tape recording, 2008, Saltville Oral History Project, Emory, Virginia; Ryan Comer and Natasha Olinger, interview by Elyse Haile and Rachel Preston, tape recording, 2008, Saltville Oral History Project, Emory, Virginia.

Depression, or as historian Crandall A. Shifflett labeled it, “the paternalistic period.”⁶⁶ In *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960*, Shifflett suggests that during this period “altruism seldom motivated the operators to provide social institutions, recreational facilities, good health care, or comfortable homes” but instead, competition among towns for workers and financial security “set the boundaries for paternalism.”⁶⁷ And it is possible that company intentions went even beyond meeting a labor need. In *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922*, historian David Corbin maintains that the efforts to establish social and cultural institutions were more than representations of care for the well-being of community members. Corbin states these attempts “went beyond welfare capitalism” and instead “constituted efforts to break down the militant solidarity of the miners’ working-class culture...these were attempts to regain the respect and loyalty of the miners while preserving the company town...The new order was not designed to eliminate class differences, but to make them acceptable to miners.”⁶⁸ Thus, while the institutions that were established in these towns certainly benefited the community members, they do not necessarily suggest that the company’s interests were completely aligned with the interests of the townspeople. Such descriptions complicate both Gaventa’s and Green’s assessments of the company town, at least as they apply to Saltville.

If Saltville fell somewhere between oppressive overseer and benevolent big brother on a continuum of company towns, what can we know about life within the company town under the administration of Mathieson Alkali Works? Further, what were the conditions within the town that led so many to view Mathieson as altruistic? First, and perhaps most significantly, Saltville

⁶⁶ Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), xiii.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁸ David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2015), 118.

and Mathieson developed simultaneously and co-dependently during the same period, from the time the company began its takeover in 1882, until its full absorption in 1893. Saltville was not officially incorporated until 1896, by which time Mathieson had existed in the town for nearly half a decade, the company owned practically everything, from the houses to the stores to the utilities by this point.⁶⁹ This co-development linked the fates of the company and the community. However, co-development did not necessarily assume equals shares of the Saltville bounty or equal exposure to the vulnerability constructed by the company processes. The cracks in the dam that had been recorded by Palmer St. Clair were likely not addressed by the company, or, if they were, not adequately. Had the management housing been below the dam, perhaps the structure's stability would have been examined more closely. But it was the laborers, not the management, whose housing was situated below the dam and ultimately destroyed in the flood. It was the workers who were left to live out the toxic legacy of the company after its shutdown in 1972. The company left, but the workers—then jobless—and the pollution remained. If Mathieson and the Saltville community were not at odds, they certainly were not standing on level ground.

What Disaster? The Disappearance of the Palmertown Tragedy from Historical Record

On February 23, 1925, the Grand Jury at the Circuit Court held in Smyth County determined the following: “An indictment against Roy Patrick, for a Felony: Not a true bill.”⁷⁰ As if on command, as Patrick's charges were dropped, the topic of the Palmertown Tragedy disappeared from the headlines of local and national news. Suddenly, what was “Saltville's gloomiest Christmas” was disposed of in a similar manner as the muck that lined Palmertown's streets.⁷¹ As this chapter has demonstrated, the ways in which the Palmertown Tragedy was

⁶⁹ Robert Cahill, “Living in a Company Town,” *Smyth County News & Messenger*, August 23, 1997, final edition.

⁷⁰ *Grand Jury's Report*, Law Order Book No. 10, page 65, Smyth County Courthouse, Marion, Virginia.

⁷¹ “Death Toll in Disaster at Saltville Mounts to 14,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, December 27, 1924, final edition.

recorded in the initial aftermath of the event were directly influenced by perceptions of Appalachian regionalism and by the power dynamics of company town paternalism—two factors that in part determined what the residents of Saltville thought about the disaster and the cause of it. However, how can these factors account for the fact that, once the streets were swept clean of white alkali muck, they were emptied of discussion of the disaster? With the exception of Carl V. Eskridge's *The Great Saltville Disaster* of 1925, William B. Kent's 1950 work, *A History of Saltville, Virginia*, and anniversary articles that surfaced inconsistently, the Palmertown Tragedy was never written about. In Saltville's Museum of the Middle Appalachians, the pinboard panel that displays images of the disaster and a list of the deceased sticks out awkwardly among the compelling and colorful professional panels that display an overview of Saltville's history along the walls. Palmertown, or rather, where Palmertown once stood, is now a mound of earth—the remains of the rebuilt muck dam that was extended over the town site mid-century. How do we make sense of the absence of the Palmertown Tragedy from Saltville memorialization? Why has the event been all but forgotten? In order to answer these questions, we must analyze the few ways in which the story of the event has prevailed. Chapter II will investigate the state of collective memory and memorialization of the Palmertown Tragedy by assessing the ways in which the story of the disaster has been passed down through generations. In doing so, it will attempt to uncover the explanation for why, like Palmertown, this piece of Saltville's history has been buried.

Chapter II

Remembering and Forgetting: Disaster in Collective Memory and the Act of Memorialization

“A Catastrophe.” This was the title given to the Palmertown Tragedy by historian William B. Kent nearly twenty-one years after the event. Despite this powerful title, Kent spent just a single page of his 1955 book, *A History of Saltville, Virginia*, detailing the Christmas Eve tragedy: “The ground was covered with a light snow, sleet had frozen on top of the snow, the temperature was much below freezing, and a light sleet was still in the air...Such were the conditions on that Christmas Eve when the muck dam broke at 8 P.M.”⁷² With these words, Kent described the stage upon which the tragedy occurred. He provided the date, the time, and the environmental conditions (in doing so, perhaps unintentionally, identified weather as the key suspect), and provided a glimpse into what at that point was the “agreed upon” narrative of what had occurred on that fateful eve.

Kent’s description demonstrates that as of two decades after the event, the Palmertown Tragedy was still on the minds of the Saltville community, although already only worth a single page. However, in the sixty-plus years that have passed since Kent’s work went to press, the Palmertown Tragedy has faded into distant memory, alongside the burial of Palmertown and Henrytown below the very same muck that swept through the streets in December 1924. What remains, then, are stories, passed down from witnesses of the event or families that were affected to their sons and daughters and so on and so forth. Regardless of the variations in the stories told—of who or what was to blame, of the details and timing—the stories themselves are of immeasurable value. They are composed of memories laden with everything that makes the tragedy significant: the loss of life, deviation from the status quo, the attempts to make sense of

⁷² Kent, *A History of Saltville*, 69.

events beyond comprehension, and the efforts to move forward after the worst had passed. Each memory is a thread that, when woven together with others, comprises a square on the quilt that is the collective memory of Saltville. The quilt is complete without this square no more than the history of Saltville is complete without considering this event, this tragic moment in time when everything changed. Assessing how the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 features in the community's collective memory allows for interpretation of how the incident shaped and continues to shape the Saltville community, even when it comes to the role played by collective forgetting.

Memory as a Category of Historical Analysis

In order to analyze the deeper meaning in the functioning of memory and the forgetting of tragedy in Saltville, we must first acquire a greater understanding of memory and its relationship to space and place and peoples. In 1950, French philosopher and sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, in *La Mémoire Collective*, or “The Collective Memory,” established a spatial and communal framework for understanding memory, suggesting that groups of people have a dialectical relationship with the space they inhabit and that their collective memories come from within that spatial framework.⁷³ The Saltville community, a company town in rural Appalachia, was intricately bound to the land upon which it was established and to the company to which it owed its existence. As Ronald D. Eller describes in his *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*, residents of such Appalachian communities “had always been close to the land, although that closeness was reflected more in strong ties to family and place than to any ethic to preserve the land.”⁷⁴ Notions of family, place, and environment were inextricably tied up both

⁷³ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 4.1.

⁷⁴ Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 10. See also, interview with Harry Haynes. Haynes speaks more to the relationship between the individual to the physical environment in Saltville.

with each other and with the Mathieson Company that established the town, employed most of its residents, and significantly shaped everyday life. Family ties ensured a connection to company employment for generations to come, and company employment could not be separated from manipulation and extraction of resources from the land.

The Palmertown Tragedy strengthened rather than rendered these ties. Extraordinary events, Halbwachs' writes, "occasion in the group a more intense awareness of its past and present, the bonds attaching it to physical locale gaining greater clarity in the very moment of their destruction..."⁷⁵ Complicating matters further is the fact that major life-changing and literally earth-shattering events were somewhat routine occurrences in Saltville. Various mine collapses and accidents, a tornado in 1917, a massacre, and two military conflicts near the end of the Civil War all occurred on the same land that would give way in 1924. Years after the Palmertown Tragedy, the land would collapse again in the 1940s in a mudslide above "British Row," the management housing of Mathieson.⁷⁶ And then, after years of environmental manipulation and industrial processes, Mathieson-turned-Olin Corporation would be forced to shut down in 1972.⁷⁷ From battles to technological catastrophe to economic devastation, all of these events have strengthened the community ties but also promoted forgetting as a survival tactic, creating mental fault lines in the minds of the Saltville community between that which

⁷⁵ Ibid, 4.2

⁷⁶ Edward E. Arnold of the Mason-Chapin Company, a wholesale drug and chemical house in Providence, RI, decided to build a chemical manufacturing plant during the early 1890s. After traveling to Southwest Virginia and hearing recommendations to locate his new operations in Saltville, Arnold began negotiations for the purchase of properties from the struggling Holston Salt & Plaster Co. At the same time, he investigated construction prospects and considered management for a new plant. Arnold looked to the British firm, the Mathieson Company, however, Neil Mathieson, the company's namesake and former owner, had sold his interests and retired a year earlier. Arnold, backed by investors out of New York, convinced Mathieson to explore manufacturing prospects in America. Following the visit, Mathieson agreed to head the Saltville operation. He brought with him management for the new plant and they resided in the area that would become known as "British Row." For more on the origins of Mathieson in Saltville, see Ronald W. Davidson's dissertation, "Saltville, Virginia, 1892-1998: Riding the Crest and Surviving the Wake of Twentieth-Century Industrialization in Central Appalachia," (1998).

⁷⁷ Jeffrey C. Weaver, *Saltville*, (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 81-86.

came before and that which followed. In the case of the Palmertown Tragedy, which wiped out the residential area, it literally expunged the place to which the community was connected. After the flood the community either moved out of Palmertown voluntarily or had their homes bought out by the company, resulting in the physical erasure and then relocation of what was considered home. Further, the burial of Palmertown beneath the extended dam and reservoir covered a site that otherwise might have been a constant reminder of the traumatic event that occurred there.

What remains are what French historian Pierre Nora described as “*lieux de mémoire*” or sites of memory, “[sites] in which a residual sense of continuity remains.”⁷⁸ The purpose of such a place is “to stop time, to inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial.”⁷⁹ But buried beneath earth and water, and without a separate space created for memorial, Palmertown functionally does not exist, even as a site of memory. If it exists at all, it does so in the received memories of descendants. Perhaps it is because of this very absence that the discussions of the tragedy have all but dropped from public discourse, and slowly, yet surely, from memory altogether. Yet, when comparing the aftermath of the technological disaster to the aftermath of the economic disaster that took place in the form of the plant shutdown, *lieux de mémoire* seem to be abundant for the latter. One can turn off Main Street onto Allison Gap Road and see the remains of the one hundred years of chemical processes laid out before them along both sides. One can observe abandoned factories, dismantled machinery, gated fields and industrial parks, and the flat, sparsely vegetated expanses of holding ponds 5 and 6 spanning for miles between Perryville Road and the North Fork of the Holston. The shifting foundations beneath the homes of Perryville that were built upon a covered-but-still-settling muck pond are evidenced by tilting structures, uneven driveways, and

⁷⁸ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Volume 1: Conflicts and Divisions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 15.

significant cracks, bumps and gullies in what was once a nicely paved roadway. The residue of industry has captured Mathieson/Olin in a moment in time, and with it the memory of the community.

Beyond inhibiting forgetting, *lieux de mémoire* have another function: “their ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections...” In addition to not allowing the memory of the Palmertown Tragedy to be forgotten, a realm of memory dedicated to the disaster could provide a linkage between the different extraordinary events that have struck the town, resurrecting old meanings and highlighting unforeseeable connections to the disaster events of Saltville’s past.⁸⁰

Memory in Saltville: News Media post-Disaster

News media was and continues to be the most abundant source of reference to the Palmertown Tragedy. Though the contemporary reports picked up in Chicago or Los Angeles or Ontario in the days following the event have long since ceased, local papers continue to pay tribute. Nearly a century after the event, papers such as *The Roanoke Times* and the *Smyth County Messenger* periodically print articles that, if only for a day, resurrect the disaster from the muck. Why is the Palmertown Tragedy still considered newsworthy? Sociologist Arthur Neal, author of *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century*, suggests that this phenomenon is not as unusual as it may seem, that, “Calamities and tragedies in the social realm provide the core ingredients of a newsworthy event. Extraordinary disruptions become attention-getting and arouse widespread public response. The news that is reported on a daily basis tends to emphasize dramatic events, unusual happenings, and moral disorders.”⁸¹

Further, devastating or disastrous events have actually been the focus of popular spectacle since

⁸⁰ Ibid, 15.

⁸¹ Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998), 10.

as early as the turn of the twentieth-century. Historian John Kasson suggests this fascination during the early 1900s represented “a horrible delight in the apprehension that devastating tragedy had both historically and contemporaneously intruded suddenly in daily affairs, even in modern technological America.”⁸² While the anniversary newspaper articles are not reenactments of the sort that Kasson references, they do fall into a specific genre of media that highlights events that break from the ordinary in calamitous fashion.

Neal further asserts that news media serves as a type of commemoration, as it always beckons readers back to the event, especially on anniversaries:

Newspaper accounts not only provide a brief description of the trauma on its anniversary but also reproduce photographic images of the event and publish comments made by those who had direct experiences with the event in question. The emphasis is not so much on the lessons learned by the trauma as continuing to give recognition to the emotional impact it had and to the place it selectively holds in the memories of individual men and women.⁸³

The accounts that continue to be published in local papers are exactly of the nature Neal described. These articles rarely provide new information, are not intended to offer closure, and often end with a seemingly arbitrary note or quote. Yet, they continue to be printed on anniversaries or major occasions, and in that way are perhaps recognizing that there are some individuals, few as there may be, that are still impacted by the disaster.

In 1977, the *Smyth County News* published a special titled, “White Yule Like No One Dreamed Of.” The Editor’s Note at the top of the page suggests the article was written in response to the feedback received from their previous story on the disaster, presumably an anniversary edition. What follows is an extremely detailed account of the tragedy, complete with images and maps. The majority of quotes are pulled from Carl Eskridge’s 1925 account, *The*

⁸² John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2011), 72.

⁸³ Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, 211.

Great Saltville Disaster, and the first few paragraphs establish nature as the culprit behind the event. Most compelling however, is the final paragraph, which states:

Under its blanket of white, Palmertown had anything but a holiday spirit. But 57 years later, the muck dam, which was repaired, expanded and abandoned, sits like a wasteland again, and Palmertown no longer exists. Most of the survivors of the muck dam disaster of 1924 who were interviewed had vivid memories of the event, but it “seems kind of like a dream now,” Mrs. Wright said. “Time heals those things,” Mrs. Forrester said.⁸⁴

Four years later, *The Roanoke Times & World News* printed an article titled, “Christmas Eve, 1924: When the Dam Broke.” The black and white image below the story depicts the left side of the dam, offering the paper’s readership a sense of the sheer size of the structure. Right below the words, “The Dam” the reader can see the break, and in the background, the remainder of Palmertown, engulfed in white.⁸⁵ Flood survivors Edith Clear Wright and Virginia Prater Evans, and Worden Poore, a rescuer who came to the community’s aid, each contributed their memories to the article. Poore offered the compelling statement, “I was up to my neck in muck...It eat holes in me on my legs and chest, it had so much lime in it.”⁸⁶ Poore was certainly talking about the chemicals involved in the production of caustic soda ash, specifically, sodium carbonate, which is classified as hazardous according to the criteria laid out by the National Occupational Health & Safety Commission.⁸⁷ The article ended with a description of the mayor’s wife mourning with the families of those lost.

With the exception of a brief mention in an article covering lethal dam breaks in Virginia published on November 23, 2013, the most recent article on the tragedy was the front-page story in *The Roanoke Times* on December 24, 2004, a tribute to the event on the disaster’s 80th anniversary. The article featured the titles, “Christmas Eve nightmare” and “The 1924 muck dam

⁸⁴ “White Yule Like No One Dreamed Of” *Smyth County News*. (Marion, Virginia: October 20, 1977), final edition.

⁸⁵ “Christmas Eve, 1924: When the Dam Broke.” *The Roanoke Times*, (Roanoke, Virginia: December 24, 1981), final edition.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ “Material Safety Data Sheet,” *Orbitas Resource Recovery* (January 1, 2008), 1, (accessed March 12, 2016).

disaster” and featured personal accounts of witnesses to the event—some of the last accounts given by many of individuals.⁸⁸ Mary Virginia Smith, age 99 at the time of the article, recalled her father’s helping with the recovery crew and being utterly shaken by what he witnessed, saying: “Mary, their toys and a little Christmas tree were floating down the river...and the little children were gone” before being overcome by tears.⁸⁹ Juanita Prater McKenna was 93 at the time of the article, and was the sister of victim Hiawatha Prater. She recalled, “Everybody told us my daddy walked all over all night that night, calling for Hiawatha.” However, Mr. Prater’s efforts would be in vain, as, “[Hiawatha] and his wife was the last ones [bodies] they found. It was a month to the day. They had just washed right around the side of the house.”⁹⁰

Beyond recognition of emotional impact, what purpose do anniversary articles commemorating the Palmertown Tragedy serve? Approaching 100-years-past, few individuals remain who can even recall the stories passed down to them about the event. With articles being printed at irregular intervals, often spaced out five or ten years, these sources cannot fabricate the value of memory for the younger generation. Sociologist Thomas Forrest suggests that the concept “anniversary” refers to the process through which “the past is consciously brought forward into the present.”⁹¹ Forrest goes on to propose that the acknowledgement of specific events as worthy of observance on subsequent anniversaries is a process of collective remembering, and that the anniversary of a disaster, in particular, “becomes an expression of community memory.”⁹² Using Hurricane Hugo (1989) as his case in point, Forrest notes the

⁸⁸ Luanne Rife, “Lethal dam breaks date to deadly Christmas Eve in 1924,” *The Roanoke Times*, (Roanoke, Virginia: November 23, 2013), final edition.

⁸⁹ Tim Thornton, “Christmas Eve Nightmare,” *The Roanoke Times*, (Roanoke, Virginia: December 24, 2004), final edition.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

⁹¹ Thomas R. Forrest, “Disaster Anniversary: A Social Reconstruction of Time,” *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (November 1993), 445.

⁹² *Ibid*, 447.

pride and confidence displayed by the communities along inland and coastal Carolina on the anniversaries following. This event was seen as a test of fortitude that these communities had endured together and bonded through, and thus deemed worthy of commemoration and even celebration. Interestingly, however, the second anniversary observance occurred predominantly within the coastal communities, with the overwhelming sentiment that they wished only to move on from the event.⁹³ The apparent connection between commemoration as remembrance and the drop in anniversary celebration from the first to the second anniversary of Hugo offers insight to why discussion of the Palmertown Tragedy all but disappeared from media within months of the event. However, it still does not explain why the Tragedy has continued to capture the headline of newspapers on seemingly random anniversaries over the past ninety years.

Perhaps, then, the 1990 *Coastal Observer* article that Forrest references can illuminate the utility of commemorating the anniversary of disaster. The article states: “Hurricane Hugo is now woven into the fabric of this community. It is a thread which winds through thought and conversation, binding and dividing people like no other event. The anniversary of the storm is a time to look back and discover how far we have come.”⁹⁴ While the anniversary articles of the Palmertown Tragedy do not contain such explicit explanations for why the story still makes press, perhaps similar sentiment is imbedded. Below the final text of the 2004 article, two images stand in stark contrast, both from the perspective of the Henrytown bridge: the image on the left shows the aftermath of the disaster as Christmas Day comes to an end—the river running underneath the bridge a vivid white, carrying along what, under other circumstances might look like icebergs. The image on the right shows what remains of the Henrytown bridge and the area beyond, present day—the concrete foundation pillars that once supported the ends of the bridge

⁹³ Ibid, 454.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 451.

and an empty field where the houses of Henrytown once stood. The river still runs below, however, in this shot is clear and devoid of any (visible) infiltrates. The caption below the right image reads: “The peacefulness of the current view clashes with the image of disaster captured in the photo at left.”⁹⁵ In these few words, perhaps, lies the value of this article and others: “look at how things have changed, look at how far we have come.”

And so the purpose of the article seems to be an ode to an event long gone but not forgotten—a tribute to the survivors, to a community that survived and continues to live on. The personal stories offered above these images are invaluable in piecing together what occurred in the aftermath of that harrowing eve but most of all demonstrate that this event, while gone from the actual memories of those whom experienced it, still resides in communal memory, though the physical manifestation of the disaster was washed away down the Holston eighty years before. Therefore, though perhaps not the most effective memorial, nor the one that the community deserves, news media has served as a placeholder memorial over the past century, keeping the memories alive until something more permanent can be erected in its place.

Memory in Saltville: Oral History

More than anything else, the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation throughout Saltville history contain the most significant glimpse at what have been considered meaningful events and how those meanings were made and what they might tell us. The children and grandchildren of the witnesses of the Palmertown Tragedy now have children and grandchildren of their own. These same generations held down jobs at Mathieson and then Olin until its closure in the 1970s. Their ties to the company, the community, and to the environment upon which both were established run deep. It is these individuals to whom stories

⁹⁵ Tim Thornton, “Christmas Eve Nightmare,” *The Roanoke Times*, December 24, 2004, final edition, p. 4.

of the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 mean the most, and these individuals who can best convey meaning to those not so intimately connected. These are the gatekeepers of Saltville memory of the dam disaster; in many ways the last bastions supporting the record of this integral piece of Saltville history, and so their words and stories carry perhaps the most weight. There have been two different official endeavors to record and catalogue the memories of Saltville residents: The Appalachian Oral History Project (1973) and the Saltville Oral History Project (2008). On a smaller (but arguably equally significant) scale, I am endeavoring to do the same now, in 2016. Each of these projects has approached Saltville memory from a different perspective and with a unique set of research questions. It is worth noting that these projects constitute memory studies from both the “inside” and the “outside” and that this distinction was influential in both determining questions asked and responses received.

The first and largest of these projects, The Appalachian Oral History Project (AOHP) was a joint initiative conducted during the early-1970s by staff and students of Alice Lloyd College, Emory and Henry College, Lees Junior College, and Appalachian State University. Beginning in the fall of 1970, this project was designed to: collect and preserve some of the region’s personal histories and memories and to encourage students to appreciate and promote the rich folklore of the Appalachian people.⁹⁶ Those groups involved in the collection of these histories targeted the portion of the Appalachian region that was closest in proximity to their respective institution.

⁹⁶ Williams, John R. and Martin, Katherine R., "The Appalachian Oral History Project: Then and Now," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 2 no. 1 (1984). This paraphrased quote comes ten years after the original project was conducted and was chosen as representative of the goals of the project. Worth noting, this statement contradicts the original program guide out of E&H, *The Appalachian Oral History Project: Program Guide and Manual* (Emory: Emory & Henry College, 1973), which on page 5 states: “The Appalachian Oral History Project has given minimal attention to oral tradition and folklore. Appalachian people have maintained an oral tradition in the face of an ever more pervasive system of mass communications, and there are resources for collections of folk tales and legends. But the principal objective of the project has been collecting information concerning the interactions of people with their region, economic and social systems, faith, and political life through interviewing techniques.” This difference in technicality suggests that each institution involved, while dedicated to the overarching goals of the project, approached their respective interviews with their own set of objectives. While

The interviews conducted by Emory & Henry staff and students focused specifically on the part of the Appalachian region that falls in Southwest Virginia, and interviewees hailed from locations such as Marion, Chilhowie, Glade Spring, Blacksburg Community in Washington County, and Saltville. The objectives of the E&H branch were to preserve the political, social and economic history of Southwest Virginia and the memoirs and recollections of the citizens of the region, all for the benefit of establishing “the political, social and economic history of Southwest Virginia and the memoirs of the citizens of Southwest Virginia and to utilize the oral history process to develop a repository source materials for the use of researchers.”⁹⁷

Significantly, though the project as a whole was targeted at the region in which Saltville is located, it is an “outside” project. The interviewers were not from Saltville, though they were likely from the region, and their motivation was not to capture stories of Saltville’s tumultuous past. In fact, in reviewing the transcripts, it appears as if the intention was to collect accounts of folklore and tradition, a construction and celebration of the region’s “culture” more than a detailed analysis of the tribulations and triumphs that constituted it.

Of the 145 official entries that Emory & Henry officially contributed to the AOHP, around 20—give or take—were conducted with people who grew up in Saltville, worked for Mathieson/Olin, or discussed the community in any capacity. Significantly, all but two of those interviewed were born prior to 1924, and the exceptions were born within a decade of that time.⁹⁸ Given the goals of the project, it may not come as a surprise that there was not a single mention of the Palmertown Tragedy—or Palmertown at all, for that matter. If there were a single set of

this inconsistency might prove problematic for research projects of a different nature, folklore does not factor into my work, and therefore this difference need not be considered.

⁹⁷ *The Appalachian Oral History Project: Program Guide and Manual*, (Emory: Emory and Henry, 1973), 12.

⁹⁸ *The Appalachian Oral History Project of Alice Lloyd College, Appalachian State University, Emory and Henry College, and Lees Junior College*, as part of The New York Times Oral History Project (Glen Rock, NJ: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1978), held in Emory & Henry Kelly Library.

questions being asked to each interviewee, this might have been a result of information being deemed irrelevant. However, as many interviewees were asked questions about their experience growing up in Saltville and specifically about memories they gathered during this period, the absence of the Palmertown Tragedy from these records collected approximately fifty years after the fact suggests instead that either the event was not deemed to be significant enough in the entirety of each individual's life to be included, or, whether by intention or the result of a half century gone, in the minds of those interviewed for the AOHP, this event had been forgotten.

In contrast, The Saltville Oral History Project, undertaken in 2008, sought simply to record “the people, places and stories of Saltville“ as recollected by 21 members of the Saltville community.⁹⁹ This project truly came from the “inside” with the younger generations of the town interviewing the elder. These histories captured details about small-town life: the community events and ties, the beautiful environment, and the history of Saltville. They made connections between life in Saltville to the world of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, to Andy Griffith's Mayberry, and heaven.¹⁰⁰ However, when prompted, interviewees also provided information about the events that did not hold the same glistening, bustling wonder as memories of Main Street on a Saturday night or the baseball stadium on game day. Interviewers asked questions such as: “Do you have any experiences that sadden you when you think about Saltville?” or “What memories have others shared with you” and these questions exposed a number of difficult or tragic moments or events experienced by the Saltville community. While interviewees predominantly pointed to the shutdown of the plant and the aftermath as the saddest memories, answers ranged from nostalgia for the heyday of the 1940s-and-50s, to moving away from the

⁹⁹ *Saltville Oral History Project* (Saltville: Museum of the Middle Appalachians, 2008).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, transcript collection introduction, pp. 10-11.

town, to what was referenced over and over as the “Muck Dam.”¹⁰¹ And then, of course, some could not think of any sad or negative experiences during their time in Saltville.¹⁰² However, those difficult memories are the ones that indicate what painful experiences are seared into the minds of community members and thus the collective memory of the town. The memories collected in the SOHP fell into two broad groups: short and to the point or drawn out and heavy-laden with detail and powerful imagery.

Most interviewees, perhaps because of their distance—temporal and/or geographic—from the event, offered up a quick, succinct reference to the event. The mention of the Muck Dam, albeit brief, demonstrates that these individuals believed the event to be common knowledge for Saltville residents—the memory that she anticipated would come up first in any individual’s mind if asked the same question. Regardless of whether an individual witnessed the event first-hand or received the memory from family, she or he certainly saw it as being a pivotal moment in Saltville’s history.

Opal Christene Allison, columnist for the *Saltville Progress*, was born in 1929, almost five years after the event, yet when prompted to tell a story that others may not be able to speak to during an oral history, stated simply: “Well, when the Muck Dam busted, there was a lot of people killed and uh. You probably heard about the Muck Dam...”¹⁰³ As a journalist, Mrs. Allison most likely saw the heading “Muck Dam” cross the pages of the paper, if only on anniversaries. Further, short of the plant shutdown, it was probably the most harrowing episode to be featured in the *Progress* during the paper’s existence.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, transcript pp. 31, 140, 167.

¹⁰² Ibid, transcript p. 44.

¹⁰³ Opal Allison, interview with Lauren Bevis, 2008, *Saltville Oral History Project*, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, Saltville, Virginia. transcript p. 21 .

Like Allison, Don Smith was born and raised in Saltville, and though he does not personally remember the Palmertown Tragedy, was saddened to think about the event, stating, “[...] Well I don’t remember the Muck Dam disaster, but I’m sure that was a sad thing. I can’t imagine what would happen on the news today if the same thing would happen and kill nineteen people, a big muck pond washing out.”¹⁰⁴ When pushed to describe what others had told him about the event, Smith painted a more detailed picture, illustrating the initial sounds and spectacle:

Well it was on Christmas Eve 1924 and I’ve heard them say that it sounded like an explosion and it was at night and they didn’t really know what had happened at first, but it didn’t take long to find out and the word sent out, was sent out to town to the plant and the people rushed down there to help in the rescue. They put up lights, car lights and so forth, and trying to get people out of there. It was a major disaster and they found bodies days later on down the river and it was just a bad deal all around.¹⁰⁵

Smith finished by noting that though the event was horrific, it no longer arises in everyday conversation. The individuals who retained the memory had passed on and unless one read about it, one had few ways of knowing what had occurred.

Bill Reams did not have any relatives who worked at the plant to transfer their memories to him. However, he recalled other workers sharing their memories with him as they had been on the frontlines. The workers noted that against the wall of slurry, the town had been all but helpless: “[...] See this was [when] you had telephones and Model T cars, and you just didn’t have any rescue equipment in those days...1924...and so people were down there groping

¹⁰⁴ Benita and Don Smith, interview by Rachel Preston and Circe Anderson, 2008, *Saltville Oral History Project*, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, Saltville, Virginia. transcript page 167.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, transcript p. 168. Like others, Smith also directed the interviewers to review the few written works on the event, perhaps suggesting that the interviewees see their own recollections as less authoritative than published texts.

around in the dark in that, waist deep in muck...And it was pretty rapid stuff too, it was carrying houses away.”¹⁰⁶

While the recollections of some individuals were brief, pointed statements, mostly acknowledging that the event had indeed occurred, leaving a dark mark on the historical record, others recounted the event and its aftermath in grisly detail. It stands to reason that the individuals who had experienced the event most directly—either having witnessed the aftermath themselves or having received the traumatic details from parents or neighbors whom were deeply impacted by what they saw. The most vivid descriptions include episodes of alarm and bewilderment, demonstrating what Elizabeth Sharpe described as, “a life-size jigsaw puzzle of a pleasant and prosperous mill village scene that had been so suddenly and violently broken apart that the pieces...natural and man-made...were rearranged in startling juxtapositions.”¹⁰⁷

The parents of Hugh Helton brought their family to Saltville the very year of the tragedy, just a few months prior. When prompted with the same question as Opal Allison, Helton, too, chose to speak of the dam disaster, having been six years old when it occurred. Helton saw houses that had been shuttled downriver in the flood tilted sideways, sheathed and bolstered by the hardened white muck that only hours before had been a soupy torrent. He also recounted stories of both rescue and recovery:

[...] They heard a little girl crying, “Mommy come and get us, Mommy come and get us.”...And my brother-in-law’s daddy, Mr. Roberts and two other men, I don’t remember their names, took an axe and chopped a hole in the roof and got the two kids out... Then two ladies had come in from Roanoke and they was a picket fence...And they was caught in that picket fence and it killed both of them...But I remember that’s still in my mind

¹⁰⁶ Bill Reams, interview by Circe Anderson, 2008, *Saltville Oral History Project*, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, Saltville, Virginia. transcript p. 157.

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth M. Sharpe, *In the Shadow of the Dam: The Aftermath of the Mill River Flood of 1874* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 95; Larry Pletcher, *Massachusetts Disasters: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival* (Guilford: Morris Book Publishing, LLC, 2006), 93.

about the little kids a hollering and seeing that house like that. And it's just like a dream you know, now. But it's hard for a young person to see something like that you know.¹⁰⁸

Charlotte Fields gave a similarly bizarre account. Fields grew up in Henrytown, another Saltville suburb that sat just below Palmertown on the North Fork of the Holston River and was spared the destruction of the flood when large pieces of the dam blocked the river. While Fields was born in 1925, she recalls her parents recounting stories of the disaster, certainly fresh on their minds during her childhood: "It was on Christmas Eve and mother told us later... that out there in the middle of that muck and water was a round table with a tablecloth on it was a coconut cake sitting on top of it [sic]...just doing down the river."¹⁰⁹

Collectively, the references made to the Palmertown Tragedy in the SOHP illuminate much. The fact that when prompted to recall the hardest moments in town history, so many community members pointed to the Muck Dam, suggests that though the event has not been memorialized, it has not more been forgotten by those whose families and neighbors experienced it. This is refreshing, given that there was no mention of the event in the previous, larger-scale AOHP, and suggests that the absence that was most likely due to the framing of the particular project, as opposed to actual absence in collective memory. Though events such as the company shutdown or loss of other business in the area may be just as prevalent in the pages of the Saltville Oral Histories transcripts, they are much more recent in occurrence and affected far more individuals who are both alive and remain in Saltville today.¹¹⁰ What is significant about

¹⁰⁸ Hugh Helton, interview by Joni Ritter, 2008, *Saltville Oral History Project*, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, Saltville, Virginia. transcript pp. 117-118.

¹⁰⁹ Charlotte Fields, interview by Rachel Preston, 2008, *Saltville Oral History Project*, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, Saltville, Virginia. transcript pp. 66-67.

¹¹⁰ See Saltville Oral History Project interviews with Henry Everhart, Opal Allison, Benita and Don Smith, Janice Orr, Bill Reams, Suzanne Riley, David Henderson, M'Ledge Estridge, and Natasha Olinger. Each individual discusses in some capacity the impact of the Olin shutdown. Certainly, these discussions are more detailed and abundant than those of the Muck Dam. *Saltville Oral History Project*, 2008, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, Saltville, Virginia.

the received memories of the Palmertown Tragedy is that they remained to be discussed after 84 years in these interviews—that this event was still deemed worthy of mentioning though almost every individual whom originally experienced it has passed on.

My own interview process, like those conducted by Emory and Henry, skirted the line between “inside” and “outside.” Though my subject was Saltville, and even more specifically, memories regarding the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924, I am not a local. Though I grew up in the Appalachian Mountain Region in Floyd, Virginia, I have no personal experience with life within a company town. However, after working to establish trust with my interview subjects and having reviewed the oral history projects conducted through E&H and in Saltville in 2008, my approach in own interviews was much more direct. My questions were pointed at discussing memories of the Palmertown Tragedy or a lack thereof. My follow-up questions prompted interviewees to consider why memories of the disaster had been passed on to them, or why they had not. Questions such as: “Can you tell me a little about the first time you remember hearing about the Muck Dam Disaster of 1924?” and “From where or whom did you hear this?” got at the origins of their knowledge of the event. Even more direct, questions such as: “The disaster has only been written about a handful of times and, with the exception of the exhibit in the Museum of the Middle Appalachians, has not been memorialized. Why do you think this is?” resulted in community members having to analyze the meaning of the disaster to the town. Though these responses could not offer an accurate or single reasoning behind memorials or the lack thereof, their significance lay in exhibiting the perceived role or importance of memorialization in the Saltville community.

My first interview was with Herbert V. “Chub” Arnold. Mr. Arnold was born during the depression, grew up in Saltville, and was offered a job with the company because he had the

ability to play baseball—a skill that was highly regarded within the company. When asked about what it was like growing up in the company town, Arnold stated: “We had things for people to do that no community around here had...everybody wanted to come to Saltville from all the surrounding area.”¹¹¹ His youth and early adulthood in Saltville were times he reflected on fondly, yet, he did recall being told about less pleasant events, such as the Palmertown Tragedy around the age of seven or eight. His father grew up on the river and when the dam broke, it backed up right into the family’s yard. Luckily, the house was spared.¹¹² This recollection does not necessarily formulate a full narrative, yet was something that his father, who was twenty years old at the time of the event, deemed impactful enough to pass down to his son.

Beyond discussion within the family, mention of the event continued to pop up, though relatively infrequently, throughout Arnold’s life. These peers most likely had been given similar bits and pieces of accounts by their elders, and came together in groups to attempt to fill in the missing fragments. Arnold recalls friends asking him to recount the memories received from his father: “All I could tell them was, “I can show you where it happened.” And all I remember about it is what my dad told me when I was a little boy...They shut the plant down and the employees went down to look for the people they couldn’t find and tried to take some corrective action to stop it.”¹¹³ Just as in all other accounts of the event, Arnold’s memories maintain that the company assisted in the relief effort. However, interestingly, his memories deviate from the majority of other accounts that suggest that the weather dealt the deathblow to the dam. Arnold remembers being told that it was the result of a technological failure, rather than natural events: “[...] From my recollection of hearing stories it had to be because the wall of the lower end of

¹¹¹ Herbert V. “Chub” Arnold, interview by author, Saltville, Virginia, January 28, 2016.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

the muck dam number two had too much pressure behind it. It had a weak spot and it just burst. A section of it just collapsed and went into those homes that were right below it.”¹¹⁴ But these homes did not remain in Palmertown following the flood. Many were swept away in the muck and the company, according to Chub, bought those that survived the onslaught. Homeowners relocated to other sections of the town.¹¹⁵ Systematically, Palmertown was reduced to nothing, and few remain to tell of its existence.

When asked why he believed there had not been any further memorialization of the event beyond exhibit and literature, Arnold admitted that he had never considered the fact that it had not been memorialized. He did maintain that he believed memorialization could be a positive thing to pursue and that stories of the tragedy should continue to be told. However, his comment ended with a word of warning: “I think if you’re going to ever do anything, it better be soon. Because you’re losing the generation of people that known something about it. Maybe very little, but they know something. And some people have got relatives but these people are dying out. Because the younger generation—it’s too far back for them.”¹¹⁶

Harry R. Haynes, manager of the Museum of the Middle Appalachians, was the subject of my second interview. Both sides of his family have lived in Saltville area for 150+ years. His grandfather William was one of first 10 employees of Mathieson Alkali Works, hauling limestone rock. His mother’s family was from Washington Co. and when she was a girl, she and her mother lived on Henrytown Road. When she was a child Palmertown was still in existence.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Population Schedule”, Smyth County, Saltville, 1930,” <http://ancestrylibrary.com> (accessed March 10, 2016). Though the residents were relocated, it seems as if many did not go very far. U.S. Census records place the Prater family residing on Perryville Road as of 1930, a road which would eventually serve as a border to Muck Dams 5 and 6. This relocation calls into question the perceived vulnerability of the family but perhaps demonstrates the connection of Saltville families to their town—despite incredible tragedy, they remained in Saltville. Twenty-first century phonebooks also place individuals with the last name “Prater” within Saltville and Smyth County.

¹¹⁶ Herbert V. “Chub” Arnold, interview by author, Saltville, Virginia, January 28, 2016.

Equipped with vast knowledge of Saltville’s history and experience working within an organization dedicated to memorializing said history and presenting it to the public, Haynes was, perhaps, best able to speak to the utility of memory in the community while at the same time contributing some of his own about growing up in Saltville, the “hub of the region” at the time: “They had the best of everything: company housing, best private high school, best private hospital, a semi-pro ball team, a golf course, swimming pool. And so people for fifty miles around would come to Saltville on a weekly basis, and on particular weekends for shopping, recreation, entertainment, and healthcare, education. So it was really quite some place.”¹¹⁷ On top of the amenities offered by Mathieson, Haynes echoes Eller in describing the Saltville experience as having gone beyond the company-built environment into the 10,000 acres that the town encompassed:

[...] So we would walk to the river and at that time fishing and hunting were birthrights in Appalachia...So we roamed the hills and the creeks and the river and we could see evidence of this rich unbroken history. We could see fossils and pick up arrow points and then out along the river were battles fought in October ’64. We would pick up bullets and pieces of cannonballs and all of that...And so I don’t know, it creates a great connection, as they say, to the land...I would say it’s virtually impossible to not be aware of all of that history that’s here...And so most of us I think who absorbed any of that became quite aware of how important it was, how unique it was in every way.¹¹⁸

However, around mid-century life in Saltville began to change. Haynes recalled the late-50s and early-60s as a “transition period from the ‘holy company town’ owned by Mathieson Alkali Works to the more modern industrial Olin Chemical Corporation.”¹¹⁹ It was at this point where the amicable, even outright paternalistic relationship between the company and the town began to change. Mathieson had been *of* the town—a company that saw itself and its management as part of the town, having been there for over a half-century by this point. Just as

¹¹⁷ Harry R. Haynes, interview by author, Saltville, Virginia, February 5, 2016.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

generations of Saltville residents worked at Mathieson, the descendents of Mathieson and the company's management did likewise. Haynes suggested, "...generations of people here considered it like their grandfather. This was their grandfather that supplied their money, their housing, their job security, and all they had."¹²⁰ Olin did not have the same shared history nor the deep generational ties to the community and the environment of Saltville. Compounding the discomfort of this transition, cultural changes resulted in efforts to replace the company town with a new business model. According to Haynes, Olin "began to divest themselves of the company town image—most notably, by selling the company housing in the mid-50s. So that was a precursor that things were really starting to change..."¹²¹

Haynes knowledge of the town spans beyond his personal experience, however. His mother, born in 1919, was five and a half at the time of the Palmertown Tragedy, and she was the one to pass the story on to him first. Like the memories recounted by Hugh Helton and Charlotte Fields, the disaster embedded itself within Haynes' mother's memory because of the way it fragmented what otherwise would have been an entirely routine Christmas Eve: "[...] She was looking out the window and watching the Ku Klux Klan parading down Henrytown Road carrying torches for light...and they were delivering groceries—food—to widows and children."¹²² When asked if these individuals were victims of the tragedy, Haynes clarified that this procession was a normal event every Christmas, continuing: "Sometime that same evening she could hear people screaming and yelling and a lot of excitement and her mother, my grandmother, crossed the hill to Palmertown and came back and said the dam had burst and

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

washed away Palmertown.¹²³ From this very first story passed on to him of the events of December 24, 1924, Haynes continued to hear talk of the event throughout his life. In the same way as the cow paths on the hills and the arrowheads along the river, “it was just something that was engrained into the fabric of our little society here.”¹²⁴

Yet, despite being woven within the very cloth that comprises the history of Saltville, the lack of memorialization could suggest otherwise. Haynes, perhaps due to his knowledge of the event’s history or because of the vantage point offered by his profession, offered up a more substantial reason for *not* memorializing, stating: “I doubt seriously that the chemical company would want to memorialize such a thing.”¹²⁵ Haynes recalled previous conversations in which he would ask, “Do you know how many lawsuits there were concerning that?” and they would say, ‘A lot?’ and I said, ‘None.’ I said, ‘We had the best of everything here, but we didn’t have a lawyer. And there’s still not a lawyer here.’”¹²⁶

At first glance, the information gathered from Haynes and Arnold in the interviews conducted for this paper, along with the oral histories collected in 2008, varies and follows no

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid. Haynes goes on to say that the company had plenty of lawyers, but the people, the town, had none to speak of. The Anniversary edition of company-issued periodical, *The Alkalite* (Saltville, Virginia: Mathieson Alkali Works, 1922) provides details of the company’s legal department as it stood two years before the disaster. One of the two individuals mentioned in the periodical are Hon. Benhamin F. Buchanan, who at the time was a member of the Alfalfa and Army & Navy Clubs of Washington, was in 1900 the Commander of the Grand Commandery of Virginia Knights Templar, a delegate to the Kansas City and Baltimore Democratic Conventions, and a delegate at large from Virginia to the San Francisco Democratic National Convention, and is referred to as “one of Virginia’s most distinguished sons”. The other, George E. Penn, served on the Board of Trustees of Emory and Henry College and of Martha Washington College, was a prominent member of the Methodist Church, and, the article states, “No lawyer in Virginia enjoys a higher degree the esteem and confidence of his brethren at the Bar and the Courts of the State, and no citizen has won greater respect in his home community.” Pleasantries aside, these individuals were heavily distinguished members of the legal field and working for the company. Buchanan also served as the 21st Lieutenant Governor of Virginia from 1918 to 1922, and was a member of the state Senate from 1924 to 1932. It is not clear whether or not Buchanan was still working for Mathieson at the time of the event. What this information suggests is that Mathieson was associated with powerful lawyers prior to the tragedy, and it stands to reason that this was the case in 1924. Sources do not reveal whether or not efforts were made to file a suit, but given the limited resources of the town beyond the company and the lawyers working for it, Haynes’ statement may certainly be plausible.

particular structure. Understandably, the individuals most directly impacted share the most vividly detailed accounts. Though several other brief accounts of the muck dam disaster are given, many are fragmented, most offer speculation on some level, and the style and specificity of interview questions ranged widely, certainly influencing the types of answers received. With such a variety of interview styles and objectives, what useful information can be pulled from these records?

Despite the glaring absence of mention from the AOHP, the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 has been remembered and discussed since its occurrence—from 1924 to February 2016. These discussions appear to require a bit of prompting—either in the form of a newspaper article commemorating an anniversary or a pointed questions attempting to get at the more difficult pieces of Saltville’s past. Yet, they are present. These received memories or scattered recollections are imbued with the possibility of recovering a piece of Saltville’s history that is on the verge of being lost.

The Next Disaster: The Company Shutdown

Mid-century Appalachia was marked by the end of the post-war boom, growth without development, and an increase in unemployment as mechanization took hold in industry and the subsequent exodus of mountain people from the region. Unable to support themselves on the wages offered by increasingly limited jobs, many Appalachian families and communities turned to public assistance to compensate.¹²⁷ A pattern of dependence and dislocation developed. And yet, Saltville was an anomaly. Mathieson Alkali Works continued to run, fully staffed, throughout the Depression. As in many other locations, industry expanded in the community during and post World War II, yet did not experience the similar bust that other extractive

¹²⁷ Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*, 30-32.

industry towns in Appalachia were witnessing. All appeared optimistic in Saltville, as its heyday continued through the 1940s and 1950s. Only with the changeover from Mathieson to Olin Corporation and the beginnings of the environmental movement did Saltville begin to be pulled into the post-industrial trend.¹²⁸

In 1954, Mathieson Chemical Works (once Mathieson Alkali Works) merged with Olin to form the Olin-Mathieson Chemical Corporation. This transition, while retaining the services that had always been offered by Mathieson—housing, schooling, recreation, health care—shifted the relationship between the company and the town. Unlike Mathieson, Olin did not have deep roots in the community’s history, and as such it was not as tied to the status quo that had developed over the sixty years that Mathieson had been a part of Saltville.¹²⁹ What Olin did not inherit in kinship ties, they certainly acquired in the form of environmental issues. Over a century of chemical processes had resulted in a severe pollutant problem, as residue and waste was poured into or leached into the North Fork of the Holston River.

According to Martha A. Turnage’s *Company Town Shutdown*, the only complete work on the Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation and its influence in Saltville prior to its shutdown, by as early as 1956, the Virginia Water Control Board (VWCB) was holding hearings regarding the pollution being carried downstream from Olin.¹³⁰ Pollutants appearing in Tennessee

¹²⁸ Ibid, 194-95.

¹²⁹ Refer to personal interviews with Arnold, Haynes. Haynes, especially, refers to a shifting relationship that resulted from the change over. Under Mathieson, familial ties were built into the hierarchical structure of the company—generation after generation of a particular family would work at the plant, and it was essentially understood that the company would be the place of employment for the next family member in line. This did not necessarily remain the case with Olin, which, as an outsider, brought with it outside interests and employees. In many ways, this shift disrupted the established industrial order in Saltville.

¹³⁰ Turnage, *Company Town Shutdown*, 8. Turnage’s in-depth discussion of the company and the way the town responded to its closing also provides helpful insight to the ubiquity of the company in Saltville during its heyday. The roots of this benevolent relationship between community and company began in the early-twentieth century, when Mathieson Alkali Works owned the company town and whose influence pervaded all levels of Saltville society. Further, the impression of Mathieson as an altruistic business in Saltville certainly helped shape the ways in which community members have remembered the disaster.

accompanied by a host of dead and dying fish all along the Holston, alerted the VWCB that the company's industrial processes were significantly impacting the environment of the region and beyond. In 1967, the VWCB adopted uniform quality standards for Virginia, and industries in the Commonwealth were notified of their role in adhering to said standards. Industries were required to: "submit an implementation plan and schedule to provide waste-treatment facilities adequate to meet the stream standards."¹³¹ Over the following year, Olin dedicated over \$2 million in efforts to adopt these new standards, but it was unsuccessful.¹³² Olin's woes were compounded by even greater regulations in water standards with the establishment of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1969. Olin was notified of these standards by the VWCB in early 1970, which, according to Turnage: "Permitted a maximum of 500 milligrams per liter of total dissolved solids (chloride effluent) that could be discharged into the North Fork of the Holston River. Olin Corp. currently was dumping 5,000 milligrams per liter. The board requested Olin Corp. to provide waste-treatment facilities capable of meeting revised water-quality standards by July 1, 1972, and to respond in writing to this request in a month's time."¹³³ Faced with what appeared to be impossible task, and recognizing that the efforts required to meet regulation would either halt production or financially ruin the company, Olin decided to bring its soda ash production to a close.

Discussions of the plant's shutdown infiltrated Saltville from 1970-forward, so the closure of Olin operations on February 29, 1972, did not come as a surprise to the community. However, the awareness did little to buffer the blow to the town. Nearly 100 years of operation ended, and with it, the way of life that generations of Saltville residents had become accustomed

¹³¹ Ibid, 8.

¹³² Ibid, 8.

¹³³ Ibid, 9.

to. The shutdown resulted in the loss of approximately 1,000 jobs, \$50,000 in annual taxes, and the reorganization of the town services that had for so long been provided by the company.¹³⁴ More than merely an economic catastrophe, the shutdown was a social disaster, a fault-line, just as the Palmertown Tragedy had been, clearly delineating a “before” and an “after.” Yet, unlike the dam disaster, the shutdown had been predicted long before the actual occurrence, and the aftershocks were far more widespread.

The company shutdown pulled the economic base of Saltville out from under the town. As authors Steven High and David W. Lewis maintain in *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization*, it stands to reason that for the residents of towns rocked by industrialization, “economic change” may be—or, at least, was at some point—synonymous with “disaster.”¹³⁵ The loss of the primary industry that had supported Saltville for nearly a century disrupted social life on every level, leaving the community reeling and searching for ways to move forward. Interestingly, this disaster is present on the Timeline outlining Saltville’s history in the Museum of the Middle Appalachians. Having occurred less than fifty years ago, the memory of the shutdown and the aftermath is still very present amongst the community. Further, unlike the Palmertown Tragedy, evidence of this disaster is everywhere.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 12.

¹³⁵ Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 25. The authors’ thesis is followed closely by a particularly poignant quote from anthropologist Kathryn Marie Dudley from her book, *End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997): “I think the symbolism of a plant closing is about the meaning of change itself. The abandonment, gentrification, and outright destruction of old factory buildings signify not just social change, but a particular kind of social change. When chrome and glass skyscrapers rise out of the rubble of an industrial plant, when bombed-out factories are left to crumble in urban wastelands where vibrant communities once thrived, the message is not just about the inevitability of change, but about the obsolescence of the past.”



Figure 7: *Olin Chemical Corporation Ruins, I*, Saltville, Virginia, 2016. Image by author.

It is worth noting that the media coverage of the Olin’s shutdown was extensive and ranged from local to national. The March 26, 1971, edition of *LIFE* magazine contained a story on Saltville called, “The End of a Company Town.” The article highlights Saltville as the most recent casualty of environmental regulation and features striking images of Olin employees and bold quotes like, “We’ve been riding the gravy train for a long time.”¹³⁶ Twenty-five years later, in 1996, the shutdown was revisited by *The Roanoke Times* in a series called “Saltville: The Town That Wouldn’t Die.” The series highlighted Saltville’s tumultuous past before suggesting that the town “defies predictions of economic ruin.”¹³⁷ A year later, *The Smyth County News and Messenger* echoed the sentiment of the *Times* article in a five-piece series called, “Saltville: A Company Town Without a Company.” The series focused on the town’s progress in the twenty-

¹³⁶ Jack Newcombe, “The End of a Company Town” *LIFE*, March 26, 1971, 42, final edition.

¹³⁷ Cathryn McCue, “Saltville: The Town That Wouldn’t Die,” *The Roanoke Times*, July 15, 1996, final edition.

five years since the shutdown, and quoted the town's mayor stating that Saltville is: "fairly well back on its feet and has been for a while now."¹³⁸ These articles, amongst many others, illustrate the ability of Saltville to capture the nation's attention again and again. Interestingly, these articles were original pieces—not acquired through the Associated Press—and featured original quotes and images. The local papers appeared to highlight Saltville's resilience, while the *LIFE* article and others emphasize victimization at the hand of industry.¹³⁹ Whereas Appalachia had been seen as the "other" at the time of the Palmertown Tragedy, the company shutdown occurred a decade after the War on Poverty and the Appalachian Regional Committee began their dual-end endeavor to raise the region from the clutches of underdevelopment and poverty and into the mainstream of America. The reification of Appalachia prevailed, and though no longer considered alien, the region was still seen as needing outside assistance to assimilate. Thus, while the name "Saltville" may have been dispersed in media more than ever before following the company shutdown, the perception of the town as a victim is as abundant in the pages of national news media following 1972 as it was in 1924.

High and Lewis suggest that, "Industrial ruins are memory places, for they make us pause, reflect, and remember."¹⁴⁰ In this way, the abandoned plant buildings, the chain link fences surrounding the muck dams, the Superfund Site signage, and all that physically remains of what was once Mathieson and Olin Corporation, are "haunted realms that 'seethe with

¹³⁸ Robert Cahill, "Saltville: A Company Town Without a Company," *Smyth County News & Messenger*, August 23, 1997, final edition.

¹³⁹ In addition to *LIFE* article, see "Va. Town At Odds Over Toxic Waste. Some Say The Cleanup Falls Short. Others Want Complaints To Stop," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 18, 1996, as found on philly.com, a comprehensive Philadelphia news source. This article discusses some of the mixed feelings of town residents toward Olin. Many are described as angry over the perceived increase in health issues like cancer. Others maintain that Olin treated the town well.

¹⁴⁰ High and Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland*, 9.

memories.”¹⁴¹ These sites, in the same breath, represent “similar sentiments of nostalgia and loss” as displaced workers and townspersons are able to reflect back on a better time, yet not without the bitter sting of the memories associated with deindustrialization.¹⁴² The authors continue, “If memory places bind people and communities together, and are symbolic in nature, then these abandoned mills and factories unite displaced workers in a memory community of anger and sorrow.”¹⁴³ These remains are physical memorials of the company shutdown. The temporal proximity of the event to the present, the physical residue that remains, and the widespread social and economic impacts of the shutdown have ensured that this event is at the centerfold of collective memory in the current generations of Saltville.



Figure 8: *Olin Chemical Corporation Ruins, 2, Saltville, Virginia, 2016. Image by author.*

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 57. Quote used within passage is that of Edensor in “Specters of History” on p. 829.

¹⁴² Ibid, 41.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 9. The words “anger and sorrow” as used by High and Lewis originated in a 1998 interview between the author and Willy Eugene Eady of Detroit. Eady stated that the process of deindustrialization in his experience was “a time of anger and sorrow.” According to the footnotes, the videotape containing the interview is now held at the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University.



Figure 9: *Olin Chemical Corporation Ruins, 3*, Saltville, Virginia, 2016. Image by author. Images like this one and the ones above illustrate the industrial ruins that still dot Saltville's landscape--ever-present reminders of a century of company presence.

The Changing Name of Disaster

In both the news media and oral interviews since the disaster, the Palmertown Tragedy has been referred to by numerous names over the past ninety years. Contemporary sources in the days and weeks following December 24, 1924, named it: “the Saltville Flood,” the “Christmas Eve Tragedy,” “the Christmas Tragedy,” “Lime Deluge,” the “Saltville Disaster,” and the “Saltville Dam Disaster,” amongst other dramatic references. Carl Eskridge attributed to the event the harrowing title, “The Great Saltville Disaster.” Such names were to be expected, given the fascination with and sensationalism of catastrophe at the turn of the twentieth century. However, over time, the rhetoric used to describe the disaster changed. As noted in Chapter II, by mid-century, William B. Kent referred to the event simply as “A Catastrophe.” Jeffrey C. Weaver’s *Saltville* mentions the event in the chapter titled “Disasters” as both the “Palmertown

Tragedy” and the “Muck Dam Disaster.” All recollections of individuals in the Saltville Oral History Project of 2008 were in reference to the “Muck Dam” with one reference to the “Muck Dam Catastrophe.” Interestingly, the Superfund site is now simply referred to as the “muck dam” as well. This same rhetoric was used in the interviews I personally conducted—it may be worth noting, however, that I actually referred to the event as the Muck Dam Disaster in these interviews. The Wikipedia page for Saltville, Virginia, names the event the “Muck Dam collapse.” As recently as 2015, the Regional Dam Safety Engineer for Southwest Virginia, Thomas I. Roberts, referred to the event as the Muck Dam Failure.¹⁴⁴

The changing rhetoric surrounding the Palmertown Tragedy illuminates much about the relationship of the Saltville community to the disaster. The initial names given to the event highlighted the calamitous nature of the dam break and titles such as “deluge” established a comparison to the great flood from biblical record. However, by the 1950s, specific mention of the location in which the disaster took place was dropped from the name. Instead, the disaster became known as a “catastrophe” and eventually simply as the “Muck Dam.” In many ways, this renaming reflects the loss of the town—why reference Palmertown if it no longer exists? Certainly, most outsiders would not know the name unless otherwise told by a Saltville resident. Interestingly, I have adopted the title and referred continuously to the event as the “Palmertown Tragedy,” throughout the course of this paper specifically because I was informed by Saltville residents that this was the proper name. And yet, even as I was assured of the usage, the name “Muck Dam” was used interchangeably in conversation with the very same individuals. Significantly, rhetoric that references only the muck dam or its break cast the event as a purely technological failure. The removal of words such as “tragedy,” “disaster,” or “catastrophe,”

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Roberts, “1924 Failure of the Muck Dam in Saltville, Virginia,” Presentation at Museum of the Middle Appalachians, Saltville, Virginia, May 17, 2015. The other references listed, outside of the Wikipedia page, have been cited elsewhere in this thesis.

remove the ferocity with which the flood of muck tore through home and life alike. The current titles are devoid of humanity, absent of blame, and wanting for significance. And so the name of this thesis will indeed remain “The Palmertown Tragedy of 1924,” rhetoric which conveys a place and a time, and underscores the heavy cost of the event.

Saltville: Memory in Limbo

As is evident by the sources consulted in this chapter, it would appear as if memory of the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 is in limbo. Discussions of the event have been few and far between over the past century. Source bases that would be expected to contain a host of information on the disaster, or a mention at the very least, given their proximity to the time of the event, come up entirely empty—i.e. The Appalachian Oral History Project. Yet, when recalled in interview or captured in text, the disaster is discussed in vivid detail, still charged with emotion and empathy, and standing out in the memories of those recollecting as one of, if not the most traumatic event to ever strike Saltville. In conjunction with these narratives, newspapers, both local and regional, have periodically printed accounts of the event, including within them fruitful discussions with witnesses that may have been lost to history otherwise. This news media, in lieu of physical memoriam until the incorporation of the Palmertown exhibit in the Museum of the Middle Appalachians in 2004, served as a raft that kept the story alive.

As Halbwach established, “[...] a truly major event always results in an alteration of the relationship of the group to place.”¹⁴⁵ When the dam burst, the relationship of the community to the soil upon which it was built was deeply altered. The trust that the land could withstand the pressure of the muck and that the space they inhabited was safe, was dislodged alongside the foundations of the homes. Yet, those individuals who were originally connected to Palmertown

¹⁴⁵ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 4.2

are no longer alive to discuss if or how their relationship to this space was altered. What we do know is that the homes that remained were purchased by the company, and townspersons moved either into a new location in Saltville or out of Saltville completely. What remained of Palmertown was evidentially felled and buried under the newly extended dam, and for the past 80 years has lay below muck and, more recently, vegetation, as the dam begins to blend into the surrounding environment once more. If a lieux de mémoire, it exists only within the mind, for it certainly cannot be visited by foot or vehicle. There is a hill where there once was a valley containing life, gravestones in the place of what were living, breathing individuals, and infrequent, sporadic discussions of the disaster in the place of “settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience.”¹⁴⁶ While there is no way to resurrect the accounts of how, on an emotional or psychological level, the relationship of the Palmertown community and the space it inhabited changed as a result of the dam disaster, there is no question that the relationship was altered physically and geographically, and that this represented a shift in collective memory as a result.

As for the role of the company in the memorialization of the tragedy and the state of collective memory in the town, sources do not divulge any hard feelings toward Mathieson in the wake of the disaster. Quite the contrary, they speak of the sweeping efforts that the company made to assist the community in recovering and moving forward, as were discussed in Chapter I. In fact, the company’s willingness to cover funeral expenses represents an actual move by the company to memorialize—in the form of headstones—those lost to the flood (though, significantly, cause of death was not listed on these gravesites). Discussions of the relationship between company and town during the 1940s and 1950s illustrate amicable rapport inside a little

¹⁴⁶ Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 1.

slice of heaven on earth.¹⁴⁷ It is not until the labor unrest of the 1960s and the shutdown in 1972 that widespread criticism of the company surfaces. This criticism suggests that perhaps relations between the company and community were not always or entirely benign. And yet, even then, criticism is not unanimous, nor suggestive of any anger grounded in the dam disaster. Yet, as Harry Haynes suggested, it may not have been in the company's best interest to memorialize a disaster that involved a technological failure of their dam.¹⁴⁸ Rather, the steps taken by the company demonstrate the recognition of high risk, the removal of individuals from the high-risk area, and the return to business as usual. Without the effort and financial support of the company to erect a memorial, perhaps such a plan would have been unfeasible. If nothing else, with the company at the heart of Saltville, it may not have been in the best interest of community members—employed by or otherwise served by Mathieson—to step out and establish such a memorial independent of the company. By the time the company was absorbed by Olin and certainly by the point in which the company shutdown, the Palmertown Tragedy was a half-century gone, and, if the AOHP suggests anything, perhaps too far removed to bring to the surface again.

Ultimately, beyond the generation that experienced it directly, the Palmertown Tragedy holds the most meaning for the generation that immediately followed, as they were passed stories of the event by their parents and grandparents. This generation had their own experiences of living in Saltville while it was a company town, were employed by or were in some other way directly connected to Mathieson, and recognized muck dams as a component of everyday life and of the environment in which they lived. This generation was the last to have a similar

¹⁴⁷ Though the phrase used here, “slice of heaven on earth” is my own usage to illustrate the community perception of life in the company town of Saltville, the term “heaven” was used in reference to Saltville during its heyday in the SOHP. See Benita and Don Smith, interview by Rachel Preston and Circe Anderson, 2008, *Saltville Oral History Project*, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, Saltville, Virginia. transcript page 163.

¹⁴⁸ Harry R. Haynes, interview by author, Saltville, Virginia, February 5, 2016.

dialectical relationship to Saltville as the generation before, because by the 1970s, that place would be drastically altered. As in Lisa Perry's essay, "Reflections on an Appalachian Camelot: Place, Memory, and Identity in the Former Company Town of Wheelwright, Kentucky, USA," the connection between company town-townspeople relations is central to development of collective memory.¹⁴⁹ Interestingly, in Perry's case study, after the company was sold in 1966, the citizens of Wheelwright began to gather for annual reunions to remember life as it was during the company's heyday.

The impact of the loss of the company town, of "Saltville as Mayberry," resulted in the creation of two communities: "one that survives in memory and one that plods slowly forward in the aftermath..."¹⁵⁰ These two communities are separated quite clearly by a generational gap and bridged only by the single generation to experience both. As a result, rather than a single collective memory, Saltville has two—one that contains all memories leading up to 1972, and another that begins in the aftermath.

The current population of Saltville does not have the same ties to place as the generations before. Anyone under the age of 45-50 does not possess memories of the town from when the company was still there. They cannot relate to the experience of growing up in a company town nor having all aspects of life directly tied to that company. They missed the heyday that the older generation reflects on fondly. And though they may look upon the Superfund site and they drive along Perryville Road past the muck dams, they were born into a world in which the environment is uniformly considered in decision and policy making. They do not value the environment primarily for what they can extract from it—because their survival is not tied to it—

¹⁴⁹ Lisa Perry, "Reflections on an Appalachian Camelot: Place, Memory, and Identity in the Former Company Town of Wheelwright, Kentucky, USA." In *Company Towns: Labor, Space, and Power Relations Across Time and Continents*, ed. Marcelo J. Borges and Susana B. Torres. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 227.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 228.

yet in the same way are perhaps less connected to it as a result. Fortunately, this generation has not experienced a mass disaster in which a significant percentage of its population was killed. Yet, without such an experience, they struggle to understand the significance. Without a connection to the members of Saltville that hold memories from before, younger Saltville residents have no tie to that collective memory, and thus feel little tie to that collective history. How is this generation to derive meaning from an event that occurred in a context that they cannot relate to? How can memorialization bridge this gap?

The final Chapter of this paper will address the process through which the Palmertown Tragedy can be prevented from vanishing alongside the last generation to hold the received memory of the event. It will show that the creation of a memorial in honor of the disaster can represent an investment in the sociocultural and economic health of the Saltville community. An examination of another community in which the same factors as those in Saltville—industry, environment, and regional ties—have influenced the decision to not memorialize disaster provides a fruitful comparison to the Palmertown Tragedy. Significantly, in this location, there has been a recent revival in attempts to capture and preserve memory. This process is wrapped up in the very same factors that prevented memorialization so many years before, and yet, in the 21st century, manifests differently. Environmentalism, tourism, and nostalgia for times past have combined to set in motion a method of utilizing collective memory for the financial benefit of these old industry towns. However, the analysis will also cover the intrinsic value derived from renewed memory and the ways in which, from a public history and disaster studies perspective, the utility and advantages of memory span far beyond the bottom dollar. Ultimately, the memorialization of the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924—memorialization, in general—can act as a bridge between distinct groups of collective memory. It can provide context for individuals who

struggle to find meaning without it. And it can offer a framework for how to approach future scenarios—in the unfortunate event that they occur—in a way that works to avoid such a rift in memory and a dislocation from place that multiple, disjointed collective memories are formed as a result.

Interlude

Grounds for Comparison: The Mill River Disaster of 1874

Silences in the historical record or repressed collective memory are not unique to Saltville or Appalachia.¹⁵¹ Nor are efforts to reveal silences and commemorate memories nearly a century after the time in which they occurred. Nearly sixty years before the Palmertown Tragedy, on May 16, 1874, the Williamsburg Dam on the Mill River in Massachusetts burst, inundating the five factory villages in the river valley: Haydenville, Williamburg, and Skinnerville, all within the town of Williamsburgh, and Leeds in Northhampton. At the mammoth size of 600 feet long and 43 feet high, it is no surprise that more than 100 acres were flooded, nor that the final death toll came to 139 people, most of whom were women, children—a third of which were under the age of ten—and the elderly.¹⁵² Given that this event was close to Saltville neither geographically nor temporally, in what ways does it function as an adequate comparison? Indeed, these differences are precisely what make the disaster in Williamsburgh, Massachusetts an ideal case study to juxtapose with the Palmertown Tragedy. Upon closer analysis, the similarities between the two dam failures are just as striking as the differences, and it is the distinctions that provoke serious questions about why the aftermath of disaster in Saltville so differed from the aftermath in Williamsburgh.

Like Appalachia, New England is a region rich in natural resources and the forests and ample waterways provided energy for industry. Wool and textile production began along Mill

¹⁵¹ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 92-96. Though I chose to use the Mill River case study in this paper, the Johnstown Flood of 1889 would have been a useful case for comparison as well, given that the flood was a result of the failure of a faulty earthen dam, that it was eventually chalked up as an “act of God” because though the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club were blamed following the disaster, they were never formally charged or punished. However, in the time since the flood, and in addition to The Monument of the Unknown Dead that was established in a local cemetery three years following, a new memorial was created following the town’s inundation in 1977. Foote suggests the erection of this memorial represents “a significant change of attitude toward Johnstown’s floods between 1889 and 1977” and that “the monument stands as a decidedly public acknowledgement of the power that floods continue to hold over the city.”

¹⁵² Sharpe, *In the Shadow of the Dam*, 45.

River in the early nineteenth century and button-making, brassworks, and silk manufacturing would join the industrial force by mid-century.¹⁵³ Much like Saltville, if on a larger scale, generation after generation of families who had populated the Mill River Valley worked at the various mills. Significantly, many of the mill owners themselves were of these same families.¹⁵⁴ Many of these mills would have fallen under the label of “paternalistic company town,” at least to the extent that they “provided the cultural needs of the villages as well as their employees.”¹⁵⁵ As in Saltville, mill owners were intimately involved in town affairs, “active in banks, churches, and politics, the mill owners controlled the local economy...they built company housing, schools, and churches...”¹⁵⁶

In the immediate aftermath of the flood, groups of survivors came together to begin rescuing the hurt, recovering the dead, and picking up the pieces of what was once their way of life. This occurred in “a customary way, the most practical and systematic way they knew—working in small teams—laboring together as if they were building a road, raising a barn, digging a pond, fighting a fire, cleaning up after a freshet, or any number of community activities...”¹⁵⁷ Having lived in the towns for generations and worked side-by-side in the factories, it came as second nature to approach the task at hand—however grisly—as a community unit. Disasters like this one were a “cultural preoccupation of the age” and it was picked up in news coverage from near and far.¹⁵⁸ The story could be picked up in local press, but

¹⁵³ Edward C. Jacob, *One Morning in May: The Mill River Disaster of 1874* (Haydenville, MA: Edward C. Jacob, 1999), 9-10.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 15. This is a stark difference between the mills of Williamsburg and Mathieson. While “founding families” filled all ranks and even owned the mills in Massachusetts, Mathieson was managed by outside forces, originally from England, and then eventually by engineers and professional personnel brought in from outside of the region.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 15. The author points to Nonotuck Silk Company in Leeds as an example, stating that they “arranged lectures, concerts, and dances” all suggested to “inspire loyalty to the companies.”

¹⁵⁶ Pletcher, *Massachusetts Disasters*, 44.

¹⁵⁷ Sharpe, *In the Shadow of the Dam*, 93.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 99.

also as far away as New Orleans, Denver, and San Francisco. Retrospectively, the sensationalized accounts of death tolls and literary pictures of the wasteland that remained foreshadowed the ways in which disasters would be covered by the press for years to come, up to and beyond the Palmertown Tragedy. However, within these reports is evidence of the divergence of the coverage of Mill River and Palmertown.

Journalists could not resist the opportunity to report on such a horrific tragedy and traveled alongside swarms of people from Massachusetts and Connecticut to capture the grim scene in print. Reporters from Springfield arrived on the scene by the early afternoon and soon after telegraphs into and out of Northampton were overwhelmed with stories of the event and attempts by relatives to get in touch with Mill River valley residents and vice versa.¹⁵⁹ However, whatever unsettling appeal brought throngs of people to the scene of the Mill River Disaster did not seem to materialize in Saltville after the Palmertown Tragedy. Word of the dam failure spread to Bristol as a result of either telegraph or telegram and the story was circulated by the *Bristol Herald Courier and the Marion Democrat*. Yet, there is no specific evidence of reporters having traveled to Saltville to take in the aftermath for themselves. Further, as discussed in Chapter I, regional or state papers like *The Roanoke Times*, *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, *The Danville Bee*, and *The Bluefield Daily Telegraph* did not send journalists to cover the event, but rather picked up the story from the Associated Press wire in the same manner as papers from California, Oregon, and Ontario.¹⁶⁰ Why the difference in coverage between the Mill River Disaster and the Palmertown Tragedy? Both events were the result of technological failure, both resulted in fatalities and the destruction of the built and natural environment, both were in

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 99-100.

¹⁶⁰ “Yule Dam Break Victims Buried,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 28, 1924, final edition.; “Breaking Dam Engulfs Many,” *The News-Review*, December 26, 1924, final edition. ; “Keep Up Search For Missing In Flood Disaster,” *The Ottawa Journal*, December 26, 1924, final edition. While the national papers received their reports from the Associated Press, the Ontario paper received the report from the Canadian Press via Direct Wire.

relatively rural locations but within an hour or two of larger cities. Like Williamsburgh, Saltville was on a rail line—a branch of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad—thus, not extremely difficult to access.¹⁶¹ It is impossible to know the definitive reasoning behind these inexplicable differences, but is certainly worth questioning.

The differences between the two disasters extended to relief efforts. The devastation of the Mill River flood was certainly more widespread and affected a far greater area and population, and the aid efforts were systematic and extensive. Wealthy donors, churches, neighboring cities, relief committees, and the Mayor of New Haven, Connecticut, all contributed to the cause, offering clothing, food, and money toward what would be determined as greater than a \$400,000 loss.¹⁶² In Saltville, however, aid was received principally by the company, the local Red Cross, and a few generous donors, all to equal a total of \$2,865.¹⁶³ The state governor, E. Lee Trinkle, extended his sympathies in a telegram received on December 26, stating: “Accept my deepest regrets at the sad catastrophe at your plant. Please convey to the stricken families my sincere sympathy in their hour of sorrow” yet offered no financial assistance in the recovery process.¹⁶⁴ What is striking about the differences between aid received in Massachusetts and in Virginia is not the sum, as it is indisputable that a far greater sum was needed to remedy the absolute destruction wrought by the Mill River flood than that needed to help Saltville recover. Further, the Williamsburgh efforts were toward rebuilding, while those in Palmertown were toward relocation. Rather, it is the list of contributors that requires inquiry. The Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 remains, to this day, the most devastating and deadly dam failure in Virginia, yet aid was not received from surrounding areas or from major cities. Perhaps the

¹⁶¹ This point is also evidenced by the fact that physicians from Abingdon and Bristol traveled to Saltville to assist in the recovery efforts, see Catron, *The Great Saltville Disaster*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁶² Sharpe, *In the Shadow of the Dam*, 103-104, 133-135.

¹⁶³ Eskridge, *The Great Saltville Disaster*, ed. Catron, 13.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

assumption was that Mathieson would cover the major costs of recovery—and they did provide the greatest amount of aid, at \$2000—or perhaps the community of Palmertown and the town of Saltville were expendable; surely they could recover on their own.¹⁶⁵

Finally, and perhaps most notably, the greatest difference between the Mill River Disaster and the Palmertown Tragedy is the subject of blame. Since 1924, blame for the Palmertown Tragedy has been cast on a variety of culprits, including the weather, earth tremors, Roy Patrick of Marion, Virginia, and heightened pressure on the dam. As discussed in detail at an earlier point, Mathieson has never been directly blamed or charged with the dam failure—possibly because the cracks discussed in the engineer’s notebook are not common knowledge—despite the company taking financial responsibility. The case of the Mill River disaster occurred entirely to the contrary. The newspaper that had first sent journalists to the scene cast the first stone: *The Springfield Reporter* asserted that the engineers, officials, inspectors, and patrons of the dam were either ignorant or indifferent, however, were aware that the dam was shoddily built.¹⁶⁶ These accusations were echoed in other papers, each increasingly bold in pointing the finger at the dam owners and then at the negligent nature of the American people.¹⁶⁷ These accusations culminated in an investigation and a trial by jury. The verdict placed the blame on the Commonwealth for a lack of restrictions on corporate dam management, the engineers for their shoddy work, the contractors for delinquency, and county commissioners for failing to examine the reservoir. Yet, “The verdict mandated no indictments. No one was charged with a crime and no civil suits were carried out. In the end, no one paid a dime for the disaster.”¹⁶⁸ In her full

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 13.

¹⁶⁶ Sharpe, *In the Shadow of the Dam*, 118.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 119.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 195-197.

analysis of the Mill River Flood, *In the Shadow of the Dam: The Aftermath of the Mill River Flood of 1874*, historian Elizabeth M. Sharpe suggests that:

Survivors didn't react, protest, storm anyone's house, or hang anyone in effigy. No one called for the resignation of county commissioners or legislators...The valley accepted the verdict, and so did the nation. Americans in 1874 lived in a complacent moral climate in which steam engine explosions, bridge and building collapses, and train collisions occurred with alarming frequency. While Americans saw the Mill River flood as a terrible calamity, it was but one incident out of thousands for which no one was held accountable.¹⁶⁹

While no individual was officially brought to justice, the process of taking judicial action may have provided some closure for the communities impacted by the disaster. Certainly, it provided the push needed to convince the Massachusetts Legislature to pass regulation regarding the construction and maintenance of dams and reservoirs.¹⁷⁰

The Mill River Flood of 1874 was the deadliest dam failure in the United States at the time it occurred. The Palmertown Tragedy remains the deadliest dam failure in Virginia history. These events were both tragic and both played upon the vulnerability of the interplay of humankind and the natural world. Only one has been memorialized. Though it took over one hundred years to produce the plaques that feature the names of the deceased in Williamsburg, Haydensville, and Leeds and the memorial park that surrounds the monument in Williamsburg, tangible markers now memorialize the tragic event. It is Saltville's time to do likewise.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 197-98.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 209.

Chapter III

The Utility of Memorialization: Communal History, Tourism Industry, and the Role of the Public Historian

I think a lot of times you're not as interested in family history or even American history or place history until you're half a century of it. And you get to be fifty and you think well if I live to be a hundred I'm halfway there! And you can look behind you and see a half-century of change or a half-century of time and that leads you to think, "What's it going to be in another half century?" And then I think you start to try to...put your half-century of knowledge into the overall picture. You look back and you see the overall picture and say "I was a part of all this."

- Harry R. Haynes, Manager of the
Museum of the Middle
Appalachians¹⁷¹

When asked why there had not been any attempts—outside of the exhibit in the Museum of the Middle Appalachians—to memorialize the Palmertown Tragedy, Harry Haynes offered the above reasoning. Certainly, there is a natural tendency to cling to the past once we feel it starting to slip away, often after we have had enough time to observe enough change to feel nostalgia for the things that came before. However, in the case of the Palmertown Tragedy, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, years have passed, and now almost an entire century stands between the tragedy and modern-day. The phenomenon Mr. Haynes referred to—the interest that develops or the inclination to recover the events of old after time has passed—did not occur, at least not in any uniform manner, in the case of the tragedy. What can account for this absence? Why did the Saltville community seem to skip this natural step? Geographer Kenneth E. Foote's analysis of human-environmental relations and "how people view violence and tragedy over long periods of time and develop a sense of their past" may offer some insight into the treatment of the memory and landscape of the Palmertown Tragedy by the Saltville community.¹⁷² His framework suggests that the places of tragic events are handled in one of four ways: sanctification,

¹⁷¹ Harry R. Haynes, interview by author, Saltville, Virginia, February 5, 2016.

¹⁷² Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 5.

designation, rectification, or obliteration. According to Foote's framework, the treatment of the tragedy in Palmertown falls somewhere between the categories of **rectification** and **obliteration**. Rectification is "the process through which a tragedy site is put right and used again," having remained significant only for a brief period following the disaster event.¹⁷³ Through rectification, the space within which the event occurred is absolved of feeling, involvement, and significance, and this particular categorization is the most common outcome of tragedy places.¹⁷⁴ There is an argument to be made that the outcome of the Palmertown Tragedy was rectification, as the residents relocated, the suburb was expunged from the landscape, and the dam and reservoir were extended overtop of the original town site. Rather than being significant for its role as a home that a community inhabited or for being the sacred place upon which many lives were tragically lost, the site became significant for its ability to assist in the industrial processes of Mathieson Alkali Works. The process of extending the dam and reservoir could certainly be considered putting the site right and useful once more, continuing and even increasing the production of salt products and thus the profit of the company. Even the preservation of the graves of the victims after the purging of the site communicates rectification, as the lack of cause of death on the headstones ensured that these memorials could not implicate the company in the

¹⁷³ Ibid, 23.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 23. Foote goes on to suggest that of all tragedy sites, those associated with accidents are the ones most likely to disappear from the landscape. He continues, "These sites are exonerated of blame and assume a role analogous to that of the innocent bystander. The tragedy could have happened anywhere. That it afflicted a particular site is purely a matter of chance. These events are always followed by a search for the cause, usually in an official investigation and/or in heated litigation. The focus of the investigation is both to determine blame and to propose preventive measures. As soon as this is accomplished, any notoriety attached to the site usually dissipates. Thus, when an airplane or train crashes, the public focuses on the cause with an eye toward preventing similar accidents and loses interest in the site itself. Attention continues to focus on the site only in those situations, discussed about, where the tragedy claims many victims from a single group and induces a sense of community loss." It is likely that the reason that an investigation did not occur was either because of a lack of options for taking legal action or because the cause was determined to be environmental, and therefore the simple solution was the move individuals out from the shadow of the dam and to be more vigilant in the construction of the extended dam.

disaster. Instead, these gravestones memorialize the company's charitable actions in the wake of disaster.

On the same side of the spectrum of tragedy categorization but at the radical end is obliteration. Obliteration is the process through which the all evidence of the disaster is effaced to either cover it or remove it from view, going even beyond rectification, "for the site is not just cleansed but scoured."¹⁷⁵ The reasoning behind taking action to obliterate a place is usually directly related to the particular event capitalizing on the worst of human nature, or the "banality of evil."¹⁷⁶ If, as seems to be the case based on engineer records, Mathieson was aware of the instability of the dam and yet did little to alleviate risk, suggesting that the company's actions were self-serving is not a stretch. Further, it demonstrates an issue that is still pertinent in the twenty-first century: the cost of doing business often comes at a heavy price. In the case of Palmertown, the cost was 19 lives, the loss of a community, and the oversight of negligent industrial and environmental practices that would, a half-century down the road, return to exact retribution.

Though categorizing where tragedy took place is a useful way of making sense of how they were handled in the aftermath, can Foote's framework provide a method of moving toward memorialization? The author is confident in his assertion that "a site's treatment and interpretation may change over time," and this casts a hopeful light on the case of the Palmertown Tragedy.¹⁷⁷ Foote is very clear that this process is a significant one, and does not

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 24.

¹⁷⁶ This is not an expression used by Foote—I took liberty in applying the concept to my work. Political theorist Hannah Arendt in her book, introduced the concept of the, "banality of evil" in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The book reported on the trial of Nazi SS member, Adolf Eichmann, and suggested that Eichmann's vile actions were not a result of sociopathic tendencies, but rather a self-serving mentality (this is certainly too simple of a definition, but will work for the intent of its use in this paper).

¹⁷⁷ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 27.

hold back in suggesting the potential damage of not addressing “the dual tendency—to celebrate and ignore” the tragic events of the nation’s past, suggesting that it:

[S]peaks to the highly equivocal nature of violence and tragedy in American society. Violence and tragedy are essential elements of the traditions and common values that bind Americans as a nation. Continued reliance on these traditions and values can just as easily fracture social bonds and divide society into winners and losers, victors and victims. This irony—that violence and tragedy can both unify and divide—rest like a shadow across the American dream.¹⁷⁸

Each tragedy that has impacted Saltville has divided the town into victors and victims, and more often than not, the company has come out on top. This is not to say that the company was not beneficial for the community or that historically, the benefits of the presence of Mathieson and Olin in Saltville did not outnumber the detriments. However, for the 19 killed in the Palmertown Tragedy and for their families, the detriments surely carried more weight. Though industry has been and continues to be central to economic prosperity in Saltville, it is essential to recognize and emphasize the elemental connection between it and the tragedy that has occurred in the town’s history. What more effective than a memorial as a constant reminder of those connections?

Making the Case for Memorial

In addition to forcing the acknowledgement of the range of events that have occurred on American soil, why is the memorialization of the Palmertown Tragedy significant for the Saltville community?

Tribute

Namely, the creation of a memorial will serve as tribute to those who lost their lives on the dark night of Christmas Eve, 1924: Charles Emory Clear, age 5; Opal Jane Pauley, age 10; James C. Scott, age 72; Christena Walk, 5 months; Lora B. Walk, age 5; Lonie M. Walk, age 10;

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 335.

Ida Lee Stout, age 24; Mary Louella Stout, age 4; Roy Lee Stout, age 1; Hazel Jackson, age 3; Maxie E. Jackson, age 18; Nannie J. Jackson, age 45; Bessie G. Prater, 10 months; Hiawatha Prater, age 25; J.D. Prater, age 49; Junior Prater, age 1; Leota Prater, age 19; Leslie E. Prater, age 3; Mamie B. Prater, age 36.¹⁷⁹ For the victims, this represents the recognition that on that fateful eve, 19 lives were snuffed out that otherwise might have been long and prosperous. For the descendents of those lost—though none appear to still reside in Saltville—a memorial acknowledges that their family members were significant, more than just numbers on a death roster and certainly worth more than the abstract “cost of doing business.” A memorial says: “this was something that should not have happened, but it did, and these were the unfortunate and unwarranted causalities of the event.” It demonstrates that no memorial could ever compensate for the great loss, but that for an incredibly long time—too long—nothing was even attempted. A memorial shows that we are trying to rectify that failure now. A memorial acknowledges that the tragedy and the community members lost were as much a piece of Saltville’s history as the company’s heyday, as the shutdown, as the events and individuals present day.

Tourism

As has been discussed earlier in this paper, there seems to be a generational gap between those who see the intrinsic value in keeping the story of the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 alive, and those who are too far removed to be able to grasp the significance of the event—at the time of its occurrence or present-day. Thus, there may need to be increased efforts to demonstrate the

¹⁷⁹ Christena, Lora, and Lonie were all children of Mr. and Mrs. J.V. Walk; Ida Lee Stout was the wife of Edward Stout, and Mary Louella and Roy Lee were their children; Maxie E. Jackson was the wife of Ernest Jackson, and Hazel Jackson was their daughter; The Prater family took the heaviest losses, as their home was carried furthest down the river (see hand-drawn map). J.D. and Mamie Prater were the parents of Bessie G. and Leslie Prater. Leota Prater was married to Hiawatha Prater and they were the parents of Junior Prater. Census, Death Certificates and Grave sites also suggest that some of the information provided by Eskridge’s book was inaccurate: Christena Walk may have been “Christina” and that she was five months old at time of death, that Lora B. Walk was five, not seven, at the time of death,

potential and tangible benefits of establishing a memorial to the event almost a century later. Enter tourism.

Eller describes twentieth-century Appalachia as, “a microcosm of the contradictions confronting modern American life.”¹⁸⁰ This description is in reference to the paradox of an increase in tourism to the very region that has been traditionally perceived as the “other.” Whether to achieve a subliminal experience or to marinate in the nostalgia or romanticism of times-past, millions of Americans travel annually to visit the Great Smokey Mountains, the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Appalachian Trail, or any number of other regional attractions.¹⁸¹ Tourism in the Central Appalachian Region draws over five billion dollars annually.¹⁸² Significantly, coinciding with the spike in ecotourism in Appalachia was the rise of dark tourism. Dark tourism, coined by John J. Lennon and Malcolm Foley in 2000, refers to the visitation of the more grisly sites of the American past—the battlefields, the cemeteries, the spaces within which disasters—whether natural or otherwise—have occurred.¹⁸³ The things that make the Appalachian Region optimal for ecotourism are the very same that have made it a rich field for dark tourism—the mountains that tourists travel to hike or photograph are the very same ranges below which workers died in mine collapses. The rivers, so favorable for fishing or picnicking alongside, are the very same that were permeated by chemical infiltrates from industrial process. Appalachia need not hide its tumultuous past—tourists are eager to see it. Damascus, merely 22-miles from Saltville, is an Appalachian Trail town, seeing thousands of tourists come through each year. It is not a stretch to imagine these tourists—or those visiting through-hikers—amongst

¹⁸⁰ Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 257.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁸² Al Fritsch and Kristin Johannsen, *Ecotourism in Appalachia: Marketing the Mountains* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 42.

¹⁸³ John J. Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (London: Continuum, 2000), 3.

others, taking a day trip to visit Saltville. The Palmertown Disaster of 1924 could not compel masses to visit the region, but a willingness to either escape the suburban mundane or be witness to grim history certainly has.

Utilizing Saltville's rich history for tourist attraction is not a new idea. The town capitalizes on its history of salt, highlighting the mastodons and mammoths that were first attracted to the deposits, the Spanish conquistadors that traded with American Indians in the area, and the Civil War battles over the "Salt Capital of the Confederacy."¹⁸⁴ In fact, even the muck ponds have been emphasized. In 2002, the sites of muck ponds 5 and 6 were bustling with activity: Olin, along with a host of other agencies, was in the process of creating a wildlife habitat on the site of dam—then covered with vegetation; "What's Going on at the Muck Dam" tours were held on Labor Day to introduce individuals to the newest stage of evolution of the site.¹⁸⁵ Due to EPA regulations regarding Superfund sites, the Muck Dam would and will never truly be open to the public, but for special tours it served as an excellent demonstration of progress. But herein lies the fallacy: The site of the Muck Dam is perceived to be useful only in demonstrating how far the town has come since scuffling with the EPA in the seventies and the shutdown of '72. Like other places touched by tragedy, unless the site represents the "idealized, patriotic vision," it is not deemed useful or worthy of attracting tourists and certainly not of memorializing.¹⁸⁶ This scenario and others like it requires a fundamental restructuring of the understanding of value in sites of tragedy. These sites, above all, are useful because they are part of the history of an area and because they help individuals, whether from the inside or outside of

¹⁸⁴ For more on the comprehensive history of Saltville, see Weaver's *Saltville* as has been referenced earlier in this work. See also, Marvel and Billings, *The Battles for Saltville: Southwest Virginia in the Civil War*, and Blaine W. Schubert and Steven C. Wallace, "Late Pleistocene Giant Short-Faced Bears, Mammoths, and Large Carcass Scavaging in the Saltville Valley of Virginia, USA," *Boreas*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2009.

¹⁸⁵ "Muck Dam Remediation Work Finished Year Ahead of Schedule," *Saltville Progress*, September 5, 2002, final edition.

¹⁸⁶ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 336.

the community, understand how a place/people came to be the way it is/they are. The story of Saltville can still be one of progress, but it cannot be of progress without plight.



Figure 10: *Muck Pond 5*, Saltville, Virginia, 2016. Image by author. Fences now enclose what once was Muck Pond 5 and, in the far distance, Muck Pond 6. On the surface these sites appear to be open fields housing green vegetation. However, underneath the sea of green is the slowly-settling chemical waste products that won this site the title of “Superfund.”



Figure 11: *Muck Pond 5, 2*, Saltville, Virginia, 2016. Image by author. The sign may state that fishing is forbidden due to private property, however, the mercury levels in the rivers as a result of a century of chemical processes rendered fish inedible long before this sign was posted.

So how might the Palmertown Tragedy be worked into the tourism industry in Saltville? For obvious reasons, the site of the event cannot be accessed as a place to which tourists can visit and observe. However, as part of a broader narrative of the industrial history of the town, a memorial dedicated to the disaster can be incorporated quite seamlessly. The tourist is notorious for being a romantic, focused on “the intensity of emotion and sensation, on poetic mystery rather than intellectual clarity, and on individual hedonistic expression,” all sentiments that can be drawn from the events and places of Saltville’s past.¹⁸⁷

Bridging the Divide: The Public Historian

Kenneth Foote emphasized the ability of a site of tragedy to change from being obliterated to being rectified, designated, or even sanctified. However, in a place where the potential for the loss of history or communal memory or the presence of nostalgia have not motivated a local movement toward such a shift, how can the process begin? A public historian, recognizing the intrinsic value in history and memory, can work with the community to revive forgotten sites of disaster. In *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, editors Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton suggest that museums, monuments, and a variety of other historical sites are “sites of practice that are social, embodied, and generative.”¹⁸⁸ As witnesses to the harsher and unsettling events of history, they continue, it is the role of curators to “evoke empathy, understanding, self-scrutiny, and a productive struggle with too much difficult knowledge.”¹⁸⁹ “The work of engaging with violence by bringing it to light, putting it on

¹⁸⁷ High and Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland*, 51-52. Description of romanticism by sociologist John Urry in *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and travel in Contemporary Societies*. High and Lewis also go on to discuss Urban Exploration, a type of tourism that highlights romanticism within urban landscapes. This, too, is applicable to Saltville, if the ruins of the company plants were to be incorporated into, say, a driving tour of Saltville’s industrial past.

¹⁸⁸ Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson eds., *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 3.

¹⁸⁹ Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson, *Curating Difficult Knowledge*, 17.

display, and addressing its impact can blur divisions between us and them, then and now, how things have been and how they could, or should be.

Having traveled to and worked with the Saltville community for the better part of the past two years, I have gained some insight as to how residents feel about establishing a means of memorializing the Palmertown Tragedy. Chub Arnold expressed how important it is to keep alive the story of the tragedy due to its intrinsic value as a piece of Saltville's history. However, he echoed the concern of losing the generation that possesses any received memory of the disaster.¹⁹⁰ Harry Haynes spoke of the myriad benefits of establishing a historical marker, stating: "The placing of historical markers...is with an aim at tourism as much as cultural significance."¹⁹¹ He noted that Saltville only began to invest in tourism in the 1970s when the plant was shutting down, and attributed these efforts both to an attempt to find a new economic source base as well as the tendency to cling to the past in times of drastic change. Regardless of the motivation, both Mr. Arnold and Mr. Haynes, alongside a host of community members I have spoken to during research trips, have expressed that they believe that a memorial is, if not needed, certainly wanted.

As an outsider who has been welcomed into the community, I hope to gain the trust of community members but hesitate to overstep my boundaries or come across as trying to take ownership of a history that is not my own. As Carol Kammen first noted about the work of local historians in 1986: "People in a locality usually expect that their history will be written to a certain standard, usually promotional style. Few local historians care to broach topics about which there is community silence, for were they to do so there could be a loss of local trust..."¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Herbert V. "Chub" Arnold, interview by author, Saltville, Virginia, January 28, 2016.

¹⁹¹ Harry R. Haynes, interview by author, Saltville, Virginia, February 5, 2016.

¹⁹² Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 134. Kammen's original description of a local historian is an individual who comes from the place in which they are writing the

Not only am I researching and writing a history that is not inherently my own, I have deliberately analyzed the silences, uncovering a darker and more complex history that the community may very well have wished to remain covered. Such a move could result in losing the community's trust, losing access to source bases, and failing to do the project—and community—justice. However, as a fellow Appalachian resident—though not one from a community that experienced the waves of industrialization—I wish to, in some small way, serve this community. I want to celebrate how they have broken the mold of the quintessential post-industrial town and are part of the first wave of communities handling difficult history in a fresh and valuable way. As a public historian, I see my role within Saltville as a consul who hopes to recommend an alternative procedure for navigating disaster, at least in public representation and commemoration.

My initial thought was to reconceptualize and recreate the current exhibit in the Museum of the Middle Appalachians to incorporate more memory and highlight the significance of a disaster such as the Palmertown Tragedy. The revision would go far beyond the current exhibit, which commemorates an event and those who died, but offers no discussion of the multiple targets of blame and lack of consensus on the topic, no analysis of the site's disappearance from the town, and no mention of how the community moved forward in the aftermath. Anyone who has viewed the current exhibition has been witness to a narrative devoid of all emotion, save the sympathy associated with such a tragic loss of life. There is nothing complicated about it—a dam broke, it killed nineteen individuals, it was an unfortunate tragedy. But why did it happen? Why does it matter? These are the questions that would be targeted in the revision. A modified exhibition would be ripe with the potential for complicating understandings of the disaster for

history. Even as an “insider” she suggests that trust can be easily lost if the historian begins to analyze silences. It stands to reason, then, that community trust for an “outsider” would be even more tenuous.

those who have previous knowledge on the topic, and for introducing a nonlinear yet multifaceted narrative to others. The exhibition would “require visitors to rethink their expectations, demanding they complicate their desire for relatively straightforward and conclusive ways of telling a story.”¹⁹³

Such an exhibition would certainly evoke a range of emotion from its audience. Surely, many would find it far more negative than the original. Some might be uncomfortable with coming face to face with the troublesome factors that contributed to the event. Others would be unsettled by the lack of conclusion—a revised exhibit would unearth far more questions than it would answer. These are but some of the risks that are associated with resurrecting controversial episodes from a community’s past and presenting them to a public that may very well be content with the existing understandings that have become the status quo. However, as Roger I. Simon notes in his afterword for *Curating Difficult Knowledge*: “When their [the curator’s] public display is carefully conceived, the traces of past violence can be placed within a redemptive, reparative narrative and consequently pain and death can be partially redeemed as memories that might function to secure more progressive, less violent futures. On such terms, public memory is taken as having the potential to make a difference in how we live our lives.”¹⁹⁴

The practical approaches and applications of curating difficult pasts addressed in this anthology extend beyond the museum to all sites of complex or contested history. This is fortunate, because despite my personal inclination, the potential of a historic marker created a greater buzz amongst townspeople. People are indeed drawn to the sites of tragedy, and while I first believed the revised exhibit would receive greater attention and attract a greater audience than a

¹⁹³ Roger I. Simon, “Afterword: The Turn to Pedagogy: A Needed Conversation on the Practice of Curating Difficult Knowledge,” in *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 194.

¹⁹⁴ Simon, “Afterword,” in *Curating Difficult Knowledge*, 198.

highway sign, I have to admit my opinion has shifted. Tourists are certainly visiting the Museum of the Middle Appalachians and when they do, they might stop at the exhibit and have their interest piqued by the terrible event. From there, museum staff can provide direction to or, ideally, a map of a driving tour that orients the visitor to the marker. In a driving tour, visitors would be able to visit the marker as well as the ruins that dot what once was the industrial landscape of Mathieson and Olin. They can drive down Perryville Road and observe the fields of vegetation that mask the muck ponds beneath. Though visitors would be unable to set foot within the ruins or within what once was Palmertown, they would get a sense of the immensity of industrial operations in Saltville. They would be able to follow the historical narrative of industry in Saltville—contemporary witnesses to both the booms and busts, the triumph and the tragedy. Such a narrative and such a tour would put on display the beauty of this piece of Appalachia while simultaneously provoking questions or critical thinking about the role extractive industry has had on Appalachia and on America as a whole. They might draw connections to the abandoned mill town in their respective state or to the smokestacks that were brought down across the tracks in their respective city. Above all else, their understanding of Saltville’s past, Appalachia’s past, industry’s past, and perhaps even American’s past, would be problematized. Thus the historical narrative begins to look less like *progress* and more like *process*.

Proposing a Marker

The process through which a marker is proposed is comprised of several steps, the first—and most significant—of which being to identify a sponsor. The relative cost of a historic marker is \$1,630, to be provided by the marker’s sponsor. Though I am taking on the role of getting the proverbial ball rolling, I will not be able to provide the costs necessary for establishing a marker. When meeting with the Town Council regarding this project, the goal is to identify specific

organizations or businesses that would be willing to sponsor the marker. It is possible that initiatives such as the Virginia Tech “Save Our Towns” program or the University of Virginia’s “Appalachian Prosperity Project” would be willing to assist in identifying sources of funding for this type of venture. “Save our Towns” is an interactive, web-based project that endeavors to offer insight on how to attract resources to small towns in Appalachia.¹⁹⁵ Various experts at Virginia Tech or throughout the Virginia Appalachian Region head up the project. The “Appalachian Prosperity Project,” by comparison, is a collaborative partnership between UVa, UVa-Wise, the private sector, and the Virginia Coalfield Coalition. This partnership endeavors to “advance education, health, and economic prosperity in Southwest Virginia” through a “university-community-industry partnership that uses a systems approach to integrate education, health, and business development.”¹⁹⁶ The APP project is the more hands-on of the two initiatives and offers venture grants to be directed at community assistance. These grants are targeted at fostering innovation and collaboration between all partners, and highlight education, health, and business development.

While grants are available only to faculty and students from both UVa and UVa-Wise and, further, are targeted at proposals that go beyond the installation of a single marker, reaching out to such a group is a possible move for several reasons. First, an expansion of the project I am attempting to complete in Saltville might look like an increase in the number of historical markers and memorials in Appalachian Virginia. Ideally, these markers would resurrect the darker pieces of Appalachian History, justified by the reasons listed earlier—the necessity of acknowledging *all* pieces of local or regional history, and for expanded opportunities in the realm of tourism. Second, if these individual communities are unable to come up with the funds

¹⁹⁵ “About,” Save Our Towns, <http://www.saveourtowns.outreach.vt.edu/about/>, accessed March 11, 2016.

¹⁹⁶ Appalachian Prosperity Project, <http://aproject.org>, accessed March 11, 2016.

needed to establish a memorial or marker, reaching out to an organization with deep Appalachian investment that is potentially willing to contribute to such a cause is the next logical and promising step. However, for the purposes of this paper and until definitive answers are provided from the Town of Saltville on the topic of sponsorship, we will proceed with the process of marker installation.

The Virginia Historical Highway Markers Criteria regulates that markers commemorate facts, persons, events, and places that have historical significance that a national, state, or regional level. The event or individual commemorated by the marker has to have occurred or passed at least fifty years prior to the submission of the marker.¹⁹⁷ Once the event has been determined to meet the criteria, the sponsor must research and write the marker text. As I have been working on this paper project for the past two years, the research component has been completed. The next step is to work with the Town Council, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, and the Smyth County Historical Society to compose text that accurately and adequately details the Palmertown Tragedy. The text can only be 100-words, maximum.

Next, a location must be determined for the marker. Ideally, this location is on public land or a highway right-of-way, perhaps in relative proximity to the location of the event. The Virginia Department of Transportation is intimately involved in the process of determining location, as the place has to be safe, visible, and cost effective. However, as we are aware, the site of Palmertown no longer exists, nor is it along a major highway. Locations near the plant ruins or along Perryville Road, overlooking Muck Ponds 5 and 6, would be the next best placement, as they feature the residue of industry and have the potential of provoking sentiment. However, both of these locations are on secondary or tertiary roadways, not ideal for

¹⁹⁷ “Historical Highway Markers, Important Information for Marker Sponsors,” Virginia Department of Historic Resources, http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/hiway_markers/hwmarker_proced.htm, accessed March 11, 2016.

accommodating high-traffic. Thus, perhaps the best location for the marker would be in the center of town along Highway 91 as it passes in between the Museum of the Middle Appalachians and the old train depot. As recommended earlier, visitors to the museum could be directed to the marker as the first stop on a driving tour of Saltville history.

The final step in the marker application process is to submit the materials collected—a map of the proposed location, photocopies of bibliographical resources, and the marker text. The application will then be reviewed at the quarterly meeting of the Virginia Board of Historic Resources. For the marker on the Palmertown Tragedy, the materials must be submitted by June 1st for the September meeting. It is the goal of the public history component of this thesis project to have said materials compiled and submitted by aforementioned deadline.

Remedial Memorials?

As evidenced by the Mill River study, the memorialization process can take many forms—a historical marker being but one of them. Matters of practicality, financial feasibility, and community preference all play a part in determining the best option for any given location, but more important than a stone sign along the highway is the willingness and even the desire of a community to embrace their whole history. By following the example set by Mill River, with the commemoration of the Palmertown Tragedy as a prototype, Saltville can begin to address the other painful events of their collective history, such as the Saltville Massacre, for which there is an annual memorial service yet still no permanent memorial or monument.¹⁹⁸ As with the case of the dam failure, the site upon which those lost in the massacre were laid to rest is unclear and

¹⁹⁸ Though historians debate the finer details of this event, the Saltville Massacre is in reference to the grisly aftermath of the First Battle of Saltville during the Civil War (October 1-3, 1864). Post-battle, injured or captured members of the 5th United States Colored Cavalry, under the command of Union General Stephen G. Burbridge, were attacked and/or murdered by Confederate soldiers. The specific location of where the slain were buried remains uncertain. For more on the Saltville Massacre, see Tonia Moxley, “Remembering the Saltville Massacre: Can Acknowledging Atrocities Help Heal Racial Divisions?” in *Southern Exposure: Making a Killing*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Winter 2003-2004, and Thomas D. Mays, *The Saltville Massacre* (Abilene, TX: McWhiney Foundation Press, 1998).

unidentified. A permanent memorial, along a similar vein as the Palmertown Tragedy, would serve as a continuation of the annual service in providing a tribute to this grisly event.

The motive of this chapter and indeed the entire public history component of this thesis project is to offer up, if not a method of healing for the Saltville community, a path to restoration of its difficult history. I arrived in Saltville with a certain set of expectations: nervous about how I would be received by the community; hopeful I could serve the community in some way by revisiting difficult events long-passed; optimistic that I could help establish a permanent memorial for the Palmertown Tragedy. What I have learned through this process is that public history, especially within a community, takes time. Time is required to gain trust, to track down sources, to tease apart a complicated past, and to conceptualize and establish a lasting memorial. Nearly two years later, it remains to be seen if a historical marker will be established for the Palmertown Tragedy, and while I do believe I have gained the trust of several members of the community, I now have to determine an “end point” for my time spent on this project. How can a public historian reconcile becoming closely involved with a community only to leave once a project comes to fruition or if the project ends without achieving the initial goals? It is worth noting that I was never approached at any point by Saltville residents to take on this project, nor has there been a consensus or movement to suggest that the town believes it is in need of healing. Nearly one hundred years have done well to cover old wounds, in much the same way as they have altered the environment of Saltville to camouflage any remnants of Palmertown. As a public historian, I believe that a hidden wound is not the same as a healed wound, and a forgotten event does not a restored history make. But as someone who has truly come to care for this community, I am hopeful that a move to memorialize the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 is the

first step by the Saltville community to acknowledge the entirety of their history—the good, the bad, and the mucky.

Conclusion

Saltville, a “Place in Process”

At the turn of the twentieth century, Saltville, Virginia, was the hub of the Southwestern section of the state, situated snugly in the Appalachian Region and producing more than enough salt to supply (at least for a time) an army. The holding ponds and smoke stacks so emblematic of industrial progress were accepted and routine benchmarks on the Saltville landscape. Equally common, however, was the shifting and settling—of the muck ponds, the steep hillsides, and the company into a position of absolute authority. Such were the telltale characteristics of Saltville culture when the muck dam burst. This was a company town, and in company towns, technological disasters and industrial accidents are a dime a dozen. From the inside perspective, a mine collapse, mud slide, dam failure—these were the cost of doing business in the bustling industrial hub of the region. And the casualties were the collateral damage. And in the aftermath, Saltville residents, seemingly accustomed to finding their footing on unstable ground, accepted the event as an element of their culture.¹⁹⁹ Concurrently, papers across the nation tried to make sense of the event from the outside, routinely picking up stories of events such as the Palmertown Tragedy and printing them on the front page. In this way they capitalized on the macabre fascination the news-reading public had with disaster. These articles likewise established and prescribed understandings of disaster within what they perceived as tiny mill village in the middle of a region characterized by ambiguity. Yet for all the attention the disaster captured, no help would come to Saltville, at least, not from beyond its neighboring towns. Thus Saltville residents, as they would time and again throughout their history, began the process of moving on.

¹⁹⁹ For the term “culture” here, I choose to use Foote’s definition as “collective beliefs and values, the social conventions and traditions that bind individuals to a group or community” and “values that shape everyday life but transcend the individual and surpass the individual’s ability to change them.” Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 33.

In the case of the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924, the process of moving forward was also one of intentional forgetting. From the outset, this project sought to answer the questions, “How can a tragedy be erased from public memory alongside or through the rebuilding process?” and further “What is gained or sacrificed through such erasure?” In Saltville, tragedy was erased from public memory through the repression of difficult knowledge, the rectification of sites of memory, the removal of a town from the map, and the return to what, at the time of the event, was the status quo. Through efforts to forget or to move on, Saltville residents obliterated the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924, largely content to lay the event to rest alongside the ruins of Palmertown, itself. It is possible that through this erasure Saltville residents believed they could recover. The rectification of the site of the disaster through the extension of the dam certainly feigned restoration, allowing the company to continue production at ever-increasing speed and capacity. Yet, always just below the surface, the memory of the tragedy remained, waiting to be brought back to life through the occasional anniversary article or busted open once more in the scuffle of the next traumatic experience. But such a superficial bandage has not been worth its weight in salt.

The cost of erasing the Palmertown Tragedy from collective memory is steep. It can be measured in the discussions that still claim that the dam burst due to natural forces beyond human interference or control. It manifests in the lauding of the company that supposedly established heaven on earth in a little valley in Southwestern Virginia. The removal has doubled as a refusal to acknowledge and take ownership of the inextricable pieces of Saltville history borne from cultural assumptions and industrial expenses. For fear of losing the virtues of Mayberry, the community ignored the realities of living in an industrial enclave, or worse possibly, the post-industrial town. The result of this tunnel vision—choosing only to view the

highlight reel of Saltville’s past—is not only ahistorical, but also insidious. The muck ponds of industry have been filled in but a gulf has opened in community memory, dividing the generations along a cultural fault line. Many of the values and ties that have for so long bound the Saltville community have deteriorated over time or were cut when the plant shut down.

In order to reestablish those ties the community must go back to the land, so to speak. The landscape is imbued with the history and values and identity of Saltville residents—past and present. Scarred from tragedy and battle-worn, it may not look like it did in 1924, the 1950s, or 1972, but the land upon which the town was established houses and nurtures the roots of the community’s resilience. Far too long has the landscape of Saltville been valued primarily as a burial ground. This study demonstrates the utility of looking below the surface to analyze the history hidden below, but also in exhuming it from its shallow grave. There above ground, committed to memory and memorial, this difficult history can be rectified in a way that offers tangible benefits even beyond the intrinsic value of memory, but with far fewer sacrifices.

Kenneth Foote describes “places in process” as sites that are “on their way toward sanctification but still ‘in process.’”²⁰⁰ This, perhaps, is the most useful way to see the site of the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924, as it moves, slowly but surely, toward the establishment of a memorial. Such a process is not unusual; as this paper has shown, Williamsburgh, Massachusetts was once considered a place in process as well, only finding meaning and establishing memorial retrospectively. By the same token it also may be useful to view Saltville as a whole, a place in process. The community, through their own efforts and objectives, and hopefully through the encouragement and direction provided in this thesis, is shifting once again—this time, toward sanctification. Through this process Saltville is making amends with its history, appreciating it

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 20.

for its role in shaping the town's course, and perhaps, for the very first time, considering an alternative method for managing a painful past.

Establishing a memorial for the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 is only the beginning. Within Saltville alone, there are numerous other pieces of history biding time until they, too, are brought to light. Likely, the move toward sanctification for these events will be accompanied by as much, if not more discomfort and adjustment than the Palmertown Tragedy. Other fault lines will be exposed, as Saltville has to acknowledge issues of race, class, gender, and negotiate other controversial matters. But with the revivification and memorialization of the Palmertown Tragedy, the town will have a framework capable of navigating such subjects. This framework can then be applied beyond the boundaries of this town to any space within which a tension exists between remembering and forgetting. Understanding the culture of disaster in any respective location and the minutiae of collective memory is a critical first step in transitioning from obliteration to sanctification, from a place of process to a site of memorialization. It is in this process that we witness Saltville, if not finally rising from the ashes, ultimately being washed by the water.

APPENDIX A

Proposed Historical Marker Text:

On December 24, 1924, a Muck Dam, owned by Mathieson Alkali Works, burst, sending a flood of alkali slurry onto the community of Palmertown in Saltville, Virginia. The failure killed 19, over half of which were children. Countless others were injured or displaced. After the flood, the dam was rebuilt overtop the locations of Palmertown and neighboring Henrytown. The disaster would become known as the Palmertown Tragedy of 1924 and remains, to this day, the most deadly dam failure in Virginia.

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