

The Great Appalachian Flood of 1977:
Prisoners, Labor, and Community Perceptions in Wise, Virginia

Henry Clay Adkins

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Melanie Kiechle

Dennis Halpin

Emily Satterwhite

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ABSTRACT

The Great Appalachian Flood of 1977 was a historic flood that killed over 100 people, damaged nearly 1,500 homes, and displaced almost 30,000 Appalachian residents. The flood lasted from April 2nd to April 5th, 1977 affecting southwestern Virginia, eastern Kentucky, southern West Virginia, and eastern Tennessee. This project focuses on the disaster relief efforts by the incarcerated population of Wise County Correctional Facility, commonly known as Unit 18, in Wise, Virginia. This project utilized locally produced primary sources known as the Mountain Community Television interviews. These interviews were archived online through the Appalshop Archives in Whitesburg, Kentucky. The Mountain Community Television interviews used for this project were recorded three to four weeks following the early April flood in Wise by media activists and volunteers. The reporters interviewed incarcerated men from Unit 18, the administrative staff and correctional officers at Unit 18, local business owners, and residential community members of Wise. This article examines how the community of Wise, Virginia reacted to the disaster relief efforts in the community. The disaster relief work performed by Unit 18 inmates in the aftermath of the 1977 flood exemplifies a growing reliance on prison laborers in central Appalachia specifically, and rural America more generally. The majority of residential community members in Wise expressed NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) attitudes toward the prison facility and incarcerated population at Unit 18. On the other hand, local business owners who directly benefited from disaster relief work and prison labor changed their opinions about Unit 18 inmates. This project details how the April flood influenced local business owners to move from "Not In My Backyard" to an expanding reliance on incarcerated labor. Most of the Wise community retained NIMBY perceptions about Unit 18 and the incarcerated population after the April flood relief efforts excluding local business owners, a small but important sect of the Wise population. The article concludes by examining Unit 18 inmates' reflections on their labor, wages, and the rehabilitation programs at the Wise County Correctional Facility in the late 1970s.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In 1977, a catastrophic flood impacted the central Appalachian region of the United States. This flood later became known as the “Great Appalachian Flood of 1977.” The flood primarily affected small towns and rural communities in southwestern Virginia, eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, and southern West Virginia. Disaster relief efforts in the aftermath of the flood varied across the region causing regional activists to criticize the government’s relief efforts. In Wise, Virginia imprisoned men from Wise Correctional Facility Unit 18 volunteered to help the local community in their time of need. This project pays direct attention to Wise, VA community members’ changed or solidified opinions about the local prison population at Wise Correctional Unit 18. The writing examines how Unit 18 prisoners viewed their role in the Wise community, their labor and wages, and the different approaches to prisoner rehabilitation. This project uses primary sources from the Appalshop Archives labeled as the Mountain Community Television interviews. In the late 1970s, Mountain Community Television interviewers were a group of local activists and volunteers that circulated broadcasts in southwestern Virginia. The Mountain Community Television interviews were conducted in the following weeks after the Great Appalachian Flood in Wise, Virginia. The interviews describe how local business owners of Wise and Unit 18 correctional administrators worked closely to change the working relationship between the community and the inmates at Unit 18. The vast majority of community members of Wise did not change their opinions about the location of the prison or the population of Unit 18 despite prisoners volunteering to help the community in the aftermath of the flood. On the other hand, the imprisoned population at Unit 18 advocated for more inclusion in the community with an expansion of educational and rehabilitative programs at the correctional facility after. This research is important because it highlights how rural communities and small towns contribute to mass incarceration in the United States. The project can be used to explain how Wise, Virginia directly, and central Appalachia generally, became an important landscape for the U.S. prison regime before the end of the twentieth century.

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Introduction

In early April of 1977, many central Appalachians were struggling to piece their lives back together in the aftermath of a disastrous flood that ravaged the region. The Great Appalachian Flood of April 1977 was a historic climate catastrophe that killed over 100 people, damaged nearly 1,500 homes, and displaced almost 30,000 Appalachian residents.¹ The 1977 flood devastated four states in central Appalachia including eastern Kentucky, south-western Virginia, southern West Virginia, and eastern Tennessee. The *National Weather Service* recorded exponentially high flooding from the Cumberland and Big Sandy Rivers in Kentucky at the beginning of April.² The highest recorded flood of the Cumberland River was reached on April 7, 1977 at thirty-five feet. It rained for four days, from April 2nd to April 5th, resulting in rainfall amounts of 4 to 15 inches falling on central Appalachian communities and small towns. The *National Weather Service* reported that the rainfall was “more than twice the amount which would be expected for a 100-year recurrence interval storm.”³ In 1977, *The New York Times* reported that “patients at a hospital in Welch, W.Va., were moved to upper floors when the Tug Fork poured into the town, flooding the first floor. Methodist Hospital in Pikeville, Kentucky on the Big Sandy, was surrounded by water, and emergency patients had to be brought in by boat.”⁴ Across the central Appalachian regions, survivors of the April flood were in a state of emergency attempting to find ways to cope with the traumatic experiences of a major environmental

¹ Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), p. 249-250.

² Gerald S. Runner & Edwin H. Chin, “Flood of April 1977 in the Appalachian Region of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia” *The National Weather Service*, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 1977.

³ Runner & Chin, “Flood of April 1977 in the Appalachian Region”, *The National Weather Service*, 1977.

⁴ The Associated Press, “Floods Force Thousands to Flee in Kentucky and West Virginia”, *The New York Times*, April 6, 1977.

disaster.⁵ The Great Appalachian flood of 1977 was a defining event in the history of the region, which led to shifts in societal attitudes and institutional structures.⁶

In the aftermath of the flood many central Appalachians relied on the institutions and people inside their own communities. Appalachian residents started to realize the total extent of their loss of property, livelihood, or housing in the following days after the flood.⁷ A manager at the Coeburn Lumber Company in Wise, Virginia stared at the destruction and debris left behind from the early April flood. He stood wondering where he and his employees were going to start cleanup efforts on the property and equipment. The sheer amount of work ahead of them was daunting. Meanwhile, a correctional officer from Wise County Correctional Unit 18 pulled up in a state-marked vehicle to the Coeburn Lumber Company. The correctional officer told the manager that he “had eleven men out here, what do you want them to do?” The manager of the lumber company said that after the incarcerated men and correctional officer showed up that “we went from there, I had eleven of them here working in the building cleaning the mud and the different equipment we’ve got in the buildings, the parts and the merchandise. Getting the mud off stuff. That’s mainly what they helped us do.”⁸ This MCT interview explains that the disaster relief efforts were not clearly organized beyond incarcerated men volunteering to help the community and correctional officers transporting them to locations in need of help. The incarcerated men at Unit 18 explicitly stated that they volunteered for disaster relief efforts to highlight their own willingness to be involved with the community of Wise. Prison laborers were

⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford Oral History Series, 2012) p. 342-345.

⁶ Chris Courtney, *The Nature of Disaster in China: The 1931 Yangzi River Flood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 3-13.

⁷ Ben A. Franklin, “More Appalachia Towns Imperiled as Flood Crests Move Downstream”, *The New York Times*, April 7, 1977.

⁸ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18: Roy Baker and Inside St.” Interview, 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9322Unit18RoyInsideSt_Avg15MbpsVBR.

often taken to local businesses who already had a relationship with Unit 18 laborers in the area. The manager of the Coeburn Lumber Company makes it clear that the help of the incarcerated population from Unit 18 was unplanned and circumstantial associated with the effects of the April flood.

Moments like this one, when men from the local prison aided business owners in the April flood of 1977, illustrate a growing reliance on prison laborers despite Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) attitudes expressed by the majority of residential community members in Wise.⁹ The 1977 flood put community divisions in Wise County over the incarcerated population at Wise Correctional Unit 18 into sharp relief by exposing the growing relationship between rural America with the U.S. penal industrial complex.¹⁰ The majority of Wise County residents did not change their perceptions of the Unit 18 prison or the incarcerated population. However, the most important change occurred among local business owners, who directly benefited from the exploited labor of Unit 18 prisoners in the region.¹¹ The use of state prison labor as a form of disaster relief directly connects incarcerated people of the Wise County facility with the members of the rural communities and small towns in Appalachia, briefly weakening the societal boundaries between incarcerated populations and their host communities.¹² The predominantly white, rural community of Wise was provided highway maintenance services and disaster relief work by prisoners of color from urban centers of Virginia.¹³ The imprisonment of people of color

⁹ John M. Eason, *Big House on the Prairie: Rise of the Rural Ghetto and Prison Proliferation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 14-39.

¹⁰ Mountain Community Television, "Criminal Justice/Unit 18" Interview, 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9304Camp18HighwayDeptCrew_Avg15MbpsVBR.

¹¹ Tracy Huling, "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America", from *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*. Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind, Editors. *The New Press, 2002*.

¹² Volker Janssen, "When the 'Jungle' Met the Forest: Public Work, Civil Defense, and Prison Camps in Postwar California", *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (Dec. 2009), pp. 702-726.

¹³ Mountain Community Television, "Prisoners at Wise County Correctional Unit 18" Interview, 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9320Unit18Prisoners2_Avg15MbpsVBR.

also provided employment opportunities for white correctional officers and highway supervisors in the area.¹⁴ This project outlines the progression of local business owners' attitudes toward Unit 18, moving from "Not In My Backyard" to an expanding reliance on incarcerated labor.

Prior to the Great Appalachian Flood of 1977 community members perceived the prison and inmates as a burden and threat to community security. After the 1977 flood, community business owners' conceptions of the Unit 18 Correctional Facility changed to include inmates in the community because of the opportunity to exploit incarcerated people's labor for profit.¹⁵ The broader community still harbored negative attitudes toward the facility's presence. The use of prison labor in the disaster relief only solidified most community members' outlooks. The visibility of incarcerated men in the flood relief efforts increased community fears. Along with shifting community conceptions of the prison and its prisoners, inmates' definitions of community belonging evolved due to the disregard of their labor before and after the flood. This project offers an example of the growing dependency between rural America and the prison industrial complex.¹⁶

This article begins by exploring the history of community anxieties that resulted from occasional escapes from Wise County Correctional Facility by incarcerated people prior to the 1977 flood. The article transitions into an examination of the community's negative attitudes toward the prison presence in 1977. The article goes on by highlighting the shifts in community opinions after many incarcerated people from Unit 18 worked in disaster efforts following the devastating April flood. Finally, this project closes by examining how prisoners' attitudes toward

¹⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁵ John M. Eason, *Big House on the Prairie: Rise of the Rural Ghetto and Prison Proliferation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Eason, *Big House on the Prairie*, p. 23-39.

their labor and community inclusion were shaped by their experiences in Wise. This article utilizes locally produced primary source interviews conducted by Mountain Community Television from the Appalshop Archives.

The primary source interviews conducted by Mountain Community Television can provide scholars with a better understanding of the dynamic conceptions of community in the aftermath of the Great Appalachian Flood of 1977 specifically, and after environmental disasters more generally. Definitions of community often change during and after an environmental disaster.¹⁷ Communities that undergo traumatic experiences change who they perceive as included or excluded from the community.¹⁸ The MCT interviews were locally produced commentaries on these changes in definitions of communities. The Mountain Community Television interviews offer insight into how prison labor contributed to flood disaster relief work. These interviews, which ranged from the April flood into the summer of 1977, are some of the few resources that document the role of the inmates from the local correctional facility. At the time, national and local newspapers neglected to include the relief work performed by the incarcerated men from Unit 18. In fact, a white inmate commented on the lack of acknowledgement from news sources, stating “after the flood, they put it in the paper about the Job Corps and all these other people helping the town out in their time of need but they didn’t say a word about Unit 18.”¹⁹

In 1972, Mountain Community Television was organized in Wise County, Virginia as an initiative seeking to establish locally produced cable programming in rural communities and

¹⁷ Theodore Steinberg, “Do-It-Yourself Deathscape: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in South Florida”, *Environmental History: Oxford University Press*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (October 1997), p. 414-438.

¹⁸ Courtney, *The Nature of Disaster in China*, p. 90-120.

¹⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18 Street and Road Crew” Interview, 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9323Unit18DavidStreetRdCrew_Avg15MbpsVBR.

small towns of central Appalachia. The Mountain Community station operated for nearly six years between 1972 to 1978. The MCT interviews are archived online through Appalshop Archives. In the summer of 1977, a reporter and camera operator from Mountain Community Television interviewed Wise County community members, incarcerated men at Unit 18, and administrative personnel of the correctional facility. The interviews were mostly conducted by volunteers or media activists in the central Appalachian region since the television station operated on a very limited budget. MCT reporters interviewed local business owners, road crew supervisors, correctional officers, prisoners, community members, and downtown pedestrians in the early summer of 1977. The MCT interviews can be divided into three basic groups as prison laborers, the beneficiaries of prison labor, and the people who were not directly affected by prisoners' labor yet still had opinions about the Unit 18 prison and the prisoners in Coeburn, Virginia. The timing of these recorded conversations is critically important since the flood had just devastated the community a mere month before the interviews were conducted.²⁰

Unit 18 had officially opened in 1964 in Wise County, Virginia. Captain Boyd claimed that the Unit 18 facility was initially built in 1952 for industry, yet he did not know the specifics of the industry or why it had moved locations. The facility's built environment included two dormitories, kitchen and dining facilities, special housing units, recreational areas, a library, and a few administrative offices. The building at Unit 18 was designated to house between sixty and seventy inmates. The surveillance and infrastructure of Unit 18 was updated in 1976, a new fence and several security lights were installed to decrease the number of escape attempts. The

²⁰ Appalshop Archive, Mountain Community Television, 1972-1978, accessed at <https://www.appalshoparchive.org/Detail/collections/25>.

security and surveillance tactics of Unit 18 were also updated to alleviate Wise Countians negative perceptions of the facility due to the numerous escapes in the 1970s.²¹

For most of the 1970s, the residential community of Wise expressed negative attitudes towards the correctional facility and the incarcerated community. The 1977 flood was a traumatic experience that altered a limited number of Wise County community members' opinions about the criminal justice system while the experiences of the flood solidified other attitudes towards the prison and prisoners. The residents of Wise continued to express contradictory attitudes towards the Virginia criminal legal system, despite local business owners and Unit 18 personnel expressing support for more inclusion for incarcerated people in the broader community.²² An analysis of the Mountain Community Interviews from 1977 allows for a better understanding of how the flood affected the Wise community and the incarcerated people in Unit 18.

The incarcerated individuals interviewed by MCT do not provide their names in the interviews but they were a racially diverse group of Black and white men. The ages of the incarcerated men range from their early twenties to their late forties. Most of the incarcerated men said that they were convicted of petty robbery or drug-related offenses.²³ This racially diverse group of incarcerated men challenge the mainstream conceptions of central Appalachian communities.²⁴ Central Appalachian communities are often portrayed as a majority white impoverished population in stereotypes and popular imagery, which erases the histories and

²¹ Mountain Community Television, "Interview with Captain Boyd", 1977 accessed at https://archive.org/details/9317Unit18InterviewWithCaptainBoyd_Avg15MbpsVBR.

²² Mountain Community Television, "Unit 18 Street and Road Crew", 1977.

²³ Mountain Community Television, "Criminal Justice Presentation at Unit 18", 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9301Camp1WithJAxelrod_Avg15MbpsVBR.

²⁴ Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 8, 2005).

experiences of African Americans in Appalachia.²⁵ The interviews by MCT amplify African American experiences as well as challenge stereotypes of the Appalachian region as white.²⁶ The MCT interviews also revealed how incarcerated people from Unit 18 conceptualized themselves and their labor in the community of Wise.

During the aftermath of the April flood, incarcerated people played crucial roles in helping the residents of Wise County, Virginia. In fact, an incarcerated young African American man remembered, “the [inmates] jumped right up and was willing to go help these people to really get this town back to normal and the biggest majority that went don’t know anything about this town or the one next to it. They just went because they felt they needed to help clean up. I feel that that right there is the reason people on the outside should look at us just like they did when was we out there with them.”²⁷ This inmate expressed a desire for inclusion in the Wise community, specifically after the flood. He felt his volunteerism was a sign that he was included in the broader community, but could sense that his contributions were not enough because of his status of imprisonment.²⁸ It is apparent that the negative perceptions from the community had reached the incarcerated population. Nevertheless, they readily acted when the community was in need. While the help from the incarcerated people shifted local business owner’s perceptions of the prison, the larger community’s attitudes were predominantly shaped by the history of escapes from Unit 18.²⁹

²⁵ Edward J. Cabbell & William H. Turner, *Blacks in Appalachia*, The University Press of Kentucky, January, 1985.

²⁶ Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, Belt Publishing, February, 2018.

²⁷ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Wise County Correctional Facility” Interview, 1977.

²⁸ Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, “Guns and Butter: The Welfare State, the Carceral State, and the Politics of Exclusion in the Postwar United States”. *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (June 2015), p. 87-99.

²⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Employees of Wise County Correctional Facility, Unit 18” Interview, 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9319Unit18HonakerRoyBaker_Avg15MbpsVBR.

History of Unit 18 Prison Escapes

The history of escapes from Unit 18 exacerbated dominant stereotypes about incarcerated men at the facility before the April flood. This section examines how the history of prison escapes contributed to broader community perceptions of Unit 18 and the inmates. This framing helps establish an important understanding of the history of relations between the community and the prison. The fear of violence or theft if incarcerated men escaped from the facility was the primary concern for most community members.³⁰ As evidenced from the MCT interviews, a serious point of contention between the community of Wise and the correctional Unit 18 was the concern over security coupled with the history of escapes from the official opening of the facility in 1964 to after the April flood of 1977. Rehabilitation Counselor Roy Baker remarked that the community was “rather upset with the place [Unit 18] and the Department of Corrections until the Director of the Virginia Department of Corrections and some of the legislators came down. Calmed people down and talked people into letting the prison stay where it is and it has.”³¹ The history of escapes from the facility certainly frightened community members and vilified incarcerated men at Unit 18 in the community further.

The numerous escapes from the facility frightened community members enough to petition for the facility’s removal from the area in the 1970s. These fears became apparent in several community member responses in MCT interviews. A white woman from Wise County clearly stated how “they don’t have the security out there for these hardened criminals that they keep out there. These people got out once before, they almost killed a state trooper here once to

³⁰ Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration*, Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 18-26.

³¹ Mountain Community Television, “Employees at Unit 18” Interview, 1977.

prove how tough they are out there. A lot of people in Coeburn don't like the prison and we don't need them [prisoners] here."³² Several community members from the rural community of Wise expressed NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) attitudes about the location of the prison and prisoners.³³ This particular woman from Wise used the numerous escapes, and one infamous escape attempt specifically, to justify her opinions about the location of the Unit 18 facility.

On February 6th, 1972, a Virginia state trooper named Ronald D. Oaks was shot by two escapees from two different Virginia state prison camps. National and local newspapers state that he was wounded with a gunshot to the head. The prison escapee from Unit 18 was named James Erps, who was broken out of Unit 18 with the help of Robert C. Blanchard and a double-barreled shotgun, as reported by two *Washington Post* staff writers.³⁴ Blanchard had escaped from the Virginia state prison in Barhamsville, Virginia, where both men had been incarcerated together previously. The Wise Countian woman claimed that "once you walk away out there, you could hide out in the brush or just about anywhere, they got mountains out there that they [escapees] can hide out for a month and walk into Tennessee or Kentucky."³⁵ The two infamous escapees did actually hide out in the snow-covered mountains and a former underground coal mine until they were captured in Kentucky in early February of 1972.³⁶ The anxieties over security still influenced community opinions about the Wise County Correctional Facility in 1977.³⁷

³² Mountain Community Television, "Roy Baker and Inside St", 1977.

³³ Eason, *Big House on the Prairie*, p. 100-109.

³⁴ Ivan Goldman & Jim Landers, "2 escapees Wound Trooper, Flee, Hold Family Hostage", *The Washington Post*, Feb. 7 1972.

³⁵ Goldman & Landers, "2 escapees Wound Trooper", *The Washington Post*, 1972.

³⁶ Goldman & Landers, "2 escapees Wound Trooper", *The Washington Post*, 1972.

³⁷ Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy*, Vintage Books, First Edition, 2016.

This particular escape, and other escape attempts, were not forgotten by Wise Countians in spite of the remarks made by administrative personnel at Unit 18. The number of escapes often justified existing fears associated with the NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) attitudes about Unit 18. Roy Baker added more detail on the complex history between Unit 18 with the broader residential community of Wise. Unit 18 employee Baker stated that “when I first came here back on February 14th of [19]76, Wise County Unit 18 had fourteen inmates leave, well, they escaped! They assaulted one of the [correctional] officers on the way out. Authorities finally captured everybody, but Unit 18 was known all over the state as the place where escapes always occurred.”³⁸ From the MCT interview with Baker and community members of Wise, we get a glimpse of history between the community of Wise and Correctional Unit 18. Community member anxieties did not lessen after the capture of the last escapee. In turn, the prison introduced new administrative staff, including Captain Boyd in the Fall of 1976.³⁹

Captain Boyd was brought to Unit 18 specifically to handle the security issues surrounding escapes and reestablish the community's sense of safety. Captain Boyd of Unit 18 explained that “I was transferred here in October [of 1976] and I was transferred for the reasons of serious problems. The people of the community had put up petitions to have the prison removed, or petitions to put jailbirds here and not felons because we had so many escapes. So I was sent here to try and get this situation straightened out. So we’ve accomplished quite a lot in under a year's time, we’ve relieved people's anxieties about escapes and security is our number one priority.”⁴⁰ From the interviews with the community members in Wise, it is clear that some people’s anxieties were not relieved, despite efforts made by the Unit 18 administration or the

³⁸ Mountain Community Television, “Employees of Unit 18”, 1977.

³⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Captain Boyd”, 1977.

⁴⁰ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Captain Boyd”, 1977.

incarcerated men in the community. When Captain Boyd at Unit 18 claims that “security is our number one priority”, he is indirectly disputing a report by the Virginia Crime Commission a few years prior as well as reassuring Wise Countians of their safety.

Throughout the 1970s, the Virginia Department of Corrections was undergoing a major transitional period to accommodate the increased rates of arrests and convictions associated with new federal drug enforcement laws of the decade.⁴¹ In 1972, a Virginia crime panel was launched by state legislators to investigate the conditions of prisons as well as the programs inside the penitentiaries, as reported by *The Washington Post*.⁴² Two years later, the Virginia State Crime Commission “recommended a top-to-bottom overhaul of the Virginia prison system.”⁴³ Educational and recreational programs were another essential part of reform efforts in the Virginia Department of Corrections in the 1970s. To ease the issue of overcrowding in Virginia’s penal system in the 1970s, Virginia Governor Mills Godwin had urged the Virginia General Assembly to issue a reclassification of prisoners as early as 1974.⁴⁴ Despite the vast reform efforts by the Virginia Governor and the General Assembly, Unit 18 remained overcrowded in 1977. Captain Boyd remarked that “the whole system is in the same condition, our jails are full and all of our prisons are full. Everybody has a lot more men than they would ordinarily.”⁴⁵ The overcrowding of the Virginia prison system generally, and Unit 18 more specifically, limited potential rehabilitation programs and created harsh living conditions for prisoners.⁴⁶ Due to the overcrowding, the Virginia Department of Corrections was in need of

⁴¹ Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, p. 163-179.

⁴² *The Washington Post* Staff Writers, “Va. Crime Panel to Launch Probe with Visits to Prisons”, *The Washington Post*, September 7, 1972.

⁴³ Helen Dewar, “Va. Prison Overhaul Urged”, *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1974.

⁴⁴ *The Washington Post* Staff Writers, “Virginia to Ease Prison Crowding”, *The Washington Post*, April 13th, 1974.

⁴⁵ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Boyd”, 1977.

⁴⁶ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18 Prisoners Talk about Prison Life” 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9183JimAxelrod_Avg15MbpsVBR.

more correctional facilities to accommodate the increasing incarcerated population as well as keep the existing facilities and communities safe and secure.⁴⁷ Wise County had been considered for an additional correctional facility in the early 1970s. One primary reason this did not move forward was due to community response to Unit 18. Local elites and state legislators actively toured Wise in hopes of securing a new prison site, but issues of security, coupled with community anxieties regarding the existing correctional facility in Wise County, delayed the process.⁴⁸

Through MCT interviews, the incarcerated men in Unit 18 also acknowledged the issues that surrounded the prison and its conditions.⁴⁹ Several of the incarcerated men at Unit 18 addressed the history of escapes and their attitudes towards escape attempts in an effort to reassure community members of their safety and dedication to rehabilitation. An African American inmate said that “from what I read when I was on the streets, this camp did have a lot of escapes but most of the ones that escaped had a whole lot of time or a serious charge on them or something like that.”⁵⁰ Reporters wrote that Blanchard was serving a 15–year sentence for armed robbery. Erps was serving 10 years for breaking and entering. According to reporters, Erps was only transferred to Virginia Unit 18 due to an earlier escape attempt orchestrated by both men while serving time at Barhamsville Unit 16 three months prior.⁵¹ Most of the incarcerated men at Unit 18 in the 1970s were serving prison sentences of 10 years or less for

⁴⁷ Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

⁴⁸ *The Wise County Post*, “Wise County Toured by Prison Committee”, Big Stone Gap, Virginia, Oct. 5, 1972.

⁴⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Wise County Correctional Facility”, 1977.

⁵⁰ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Wise County Correctional Facility”, 1977.

⁵¹ Goldman & Landers, “2 escapees Wound Trooper”, *The Washington Post*, 1972.

theft or drug offenses.⁵² As explained by Captain Boyd upon his arrival in 1976, “the purpose of this unit was changed by the Director of Adult Services to not accept anyone serving over a 10–year prison sentence. Most of the inmates here are for breaking and entering and robbery and that type of thing. We have all felons, we don’t have any jailbirds. A jailbird is someone serving 12 months or less.”⁵³ Despite the misconceptions of the “hardened criminals” by community members, Unit 18 did not have any incarcerated people serving over 10 years and it was a medium security facility.⁵⁴ Escapes did occur, but decreased beginning in 1976 when the classification of prisoners changed and conditions slightly improved. Even with the noticeable changes in the incarcerated population and decreased number of escapes, community members still held negative attitudes about the prison presence in the region and continued to draw upon the history of escapes to justify their opinions.⁵⁵

⁵² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, The New Press, 2010, p. 44-48.

⁵³ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Captain Boyd”, 1977.

⁵⁴ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18: Roy Baker and Inside St.”, 1977.

⁵⁵ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, p. 101-102.

Negative Attitudes about Unit 18

In 1977, MCT interviewed various members of Wise County, Virginia and hosted community panels with incarcerated men from Unit 18. This section outlines the opinions of community members as well as incarcerated men. This section emphasizes the differing definitions of community and how prison labor after the flood did not change the broader community's outlook on incarcerated populations. The majority of the audience for the community panels were MCT reporters and incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals from the region. The general absence of residential members of Wise at the community panels illustrates some of the disinterest or negative opinions towards Unit 18 from the perspective of the community.⁵⁶ At the time, MCT was reporting on the community relationship between the Unit 18 facility and Wise for a local broadcast in Southwestern Virginia. The majority of community members interviewed in Wise did not consider the incarcerated individuals at Unit 18 members of the community despite the numerous examples of community services provided by the labor of Unit 18 in the area. The history of escapes shaped negative attitudes about Unit 18 among the general population of Wise in spite of the efforts in the April flood and regular labor performed by prisoners in the community.⁵⁷

It's clear from the 1977 interviews that residents of Wise had negative perspectives on the location of the prison in the community as well as the incarcerated men at Unit 18. When an MCT reporter asked community members "what's your feelings about the Coeburn prison?"⁵⁸ a

⁵⁶ Mountain Community Television, "Criminal Justice Presentation Q&A at Unit 18", 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9302Camp2WithJAxelrod_Avg15MbpsVBR.

⁵⁷ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, p. 104-109.

⁵⁸ Mountain Community Television, "Unit 18: Roy Baker and Inside St." Interview, 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9322Unit18RoyInsideSt_Avg15MbpsVBR.

woman of the Wise community responded with “well naturally, I don’t like it. I think it is too close to the area. I also feel like they don’t have the security that they need.” The MCT reporter followed up by asking the larger group of community members gathered downtown, “do you think the community owes something to the prisoners?”⁵⁹ A middle-aged man staunchly replied “no I don’t at all, do you?!” The MCT reporter replied with “yes I do because they do an awful lot of work around here with practically no wages.”⁶⁰ Then an elderly man from the community of Wise retorted that “they should be punished for the crimes committed, I don’t think they need to be treated like an animal or anything like that but I don’t think they ever do enough work to ever hurt themselves around here.”⁶¹ The incarcerated men from Unit 18 worked daily with the highway department for seventy-five cents a day.⁶² Several of the incarcerated men from Unit 18 were shown sweeping a main downtown road since the community lacked an adequate sweeping machine for the roads. Most of the labor performed by prisoners was associated with the maintenance of the local highway system. Yet, through statements and physical responses, the community members’ attitudes about Unit 18 consistently remained negative regardless of the labor performed by prisoners in the community.⁶³

The amount of labor performed by the incarcerated men from Unit 18 in Wise was not enough to diminish the fear of crime or NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) attitudes for several community members. The MCT reporter did not shy away from confronting community members downtown with the amount of prisoner labor regularly performed in the community.

⁵⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St”, 1977.

⁶⁰ Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St”, 1977.

⁶¹ Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St”, 1977.

⁶² Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18: Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

⁶³ Heather Ann Thompson, “Rethinking Working-Class Struggle through the Lens of the Carceral State: Toward a Labor History of Inmates and Guards”, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Vol. 8, Issue 3, 2011, p. 15-45.

The MCT reporter asked a woman from Wise “what about the work they do on the roads and so forth and so on? Obviously they do do a certain amount of work.”⁶⁴ The Wise Countian woman responded with “well they do a certain amount of work sure but is it worth it when they escape and the fear you feel when you sit in your home.”⁶⁵ The reporter then directly asked the woman if she was frightened by the Unit 18 prisoners. She then replied “yes...you heard all the sirens...they were telling people they were loose in the Coeburn area, so what does people do?” She continued “They go and load a gun and you’re sitting there waiting. More security measures need to be taken if they [the prison and the prisoners] are going to stay here,”⁶⁶ The community members of Wise were clearly frightened by the presence of the prison. The responses indicating fear were often gendered, meaning women were more likely to explicitly state their concerns, whereas men declined to state their fear of prisoners on camera.⁶⁷ Many of the fears outlined by the residents mirrored national rhetoric about prisons and incarcerated people, primarily fear of violence or theft.⁶⁸ During interviews with MCT, inmates of Unit 18 detailed the negative responses they received from community members while in public working in the town, visiting a doctor’s office, or the general store.

An African American inmate who was a resident of Wise prior to incarceration there recalled during trips to town, “Everybody is looking at you, they see that you’re handcuffed. The first thing they think is that you’re a murderer or rapist...They [the community] think you are in there [prison] for a major charge, when along you could just be in for a probation violation or a

⁶⁴ Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St”, 1977.

⁶⁵ Mountain Community Television, “Employees of Unit 18”, 1977.

⁶⁶ Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St”, 1977.

⁶⁷ Rebecca R. Scott, *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2010.

⁶⁸ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

B&E [breaking and entering] charge.”⁶⁹ This inmate explains the frustration that accompanies the lack of inclusion in the community, because without understanding of the prison and prisoners, community members make assumptions.⁷⁰ He goes on to state “it gives them a good excuse to spread it all throughout the community.” This inmate experienced being handcuffed as a form of public humiliation. The incarcerated African American from Wise was an anomaly among most of the incarcerated men at Unit 18 because he was the only individual that claimed to be from the community of Wise in the MCT interviews. For this inmate, the exclusion from the community was apparent because his status as a prisoner completely shifted how he could interact with a community that once included him. This inmate would have been easily recognized by longtime acquaintances while working in the small rural community on the highway crews or in flood relief efforts. Considering that most of his family and friends would have lived in the area, rumors about him or others from Wise were communicated more specifically and quicker than those about an individual not from Wise. For incarcerated men at Unit 18, going out in public offered more opportunities for community interaction and employment, yet they were also regulated by correctional policies and the negative perceptions from community members. The hostility from community residents toward the incarcerated men was clearly known between the two groups.⁷¹

In the 1970s, Wise County, Virginia was a predominantly white community. Southwestern Virginia has a well-documented history of racial violence from the early half of the twentieth century, despite people of color representing less than ten percent of the total population of the seventeen county area. The last publicly recorded lynching in Wise, and in the

⁶⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Unit 18”, 1977.

⁷⁰ Robert T. Chase, “We Are Not Slaves: Rethinking the Rise of Carceral States through the Lens of the Prisoners’ Rights Movement”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 102, No. 1, p. 73-86.

⁷¹ Mountain Community Television, “Employees of Unit 18”, 1977.

state of Virginia, occurred on November 30th, 1927.⁷² An African American man by the name of Leonard Woods was lynched by a violent white mob, who alleged that Woods had murdered a white coal mine foreman in Wise.⁷³ By 1977, Wise Countians, who were children at the time of Leonard Woods' lynching, were middle-aged. The legacy of racism and racial terror in Wise certainly influenced how white and Black people interacted in Southwestern Virginia.⁷⁴

Most of the incarcerated men interviewed were Black and from urban centers of Virginia. Captain Boyd remarked that “we have inmates from Richmond, Martinsville, and a lot of places from the East [of Virginia].”⁷⁵ The majority of the incarcerated population at Unit 18 were sent to the facility far from their home communities. Most of the population of Unit 18 were African American and not from the central Appalachia region. Racial differences between the residential community of Wise and the incarcerated population shaped the relationship between the two groups.⁷⁶ When an MCT reporter asked Captain Boyd directly “why are the inmates so far away from home?” Captain Boyd remarked that “it is a security thing, a lot of times if an inmate sees his family or friends he’s going to run and they do run... If an inmate is out working and he sees his family or friends, it’s certainly going to disrupt him a whole lot.”⁷⁷ Captain Boyd expresses concern over the embarrassment faced by the family members or incarcerated population but does not necessarily address the policy that places incarcerated persons far away from their home communities. The only clear explanation from the interview with Captain Boyd is the fact that

⁷² Racial Terror: Lynching in Virginia, accessed at <https://sites.lib.jmu.edu/valynchings/>.

⁷³ Zoe Carihfield, Tom Costa. Dylan Mabe & Thomas Noble, “Three Lynchings in Wise County”, *Racial Terror: Lynching in Virginia*, 2019. Accessed at <https://sites.lib.jmu.edu/valynchings/three-lynchings-in-wise-county/>.

⁷⁴ James William Hagy, “Lynching in Southwest Virginia”, *Racial Terror: Lynching in Virginia*, 2019. Accessed at <https://sites.lib.jmu.edu/valynchings/southwest-va/>.

⁷⁵ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Boyd”, 1977.

⁷⁶ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18 Road Crew and Prison Yard” Interview, 1977, accessed at https://archive.org/details/9321Unit18RoadCrewPrisonYard_Avg15MbpsVBR.

⁷⁷ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Boyd”, 1977.

security is more important than full rehabilitation. Incarcerated individuals unfamiliar with the community that hosts the prison facility created another barrier to rehabilitation. This physical and social distance that was placed between incarcerated people and the broader community reified negative attitudes and firm barriers.⁷⁸

In part, the separation between the imprisoned population and the surrounding community in Wise was by design. Another African American inmate from Unit 18 went even further in saying that “I don’t necessarily think it is more or less just the handcuffs, the whole nutshell is the fact that the administration, I won’t go as far to say they won’t allow, but they won’t take the time to let the inmates have more community [sic] relations here in the community of Wise, Coeburn, or Big Stone Gap.”⁷⁹ Social boundaries and strict correctional policies by Unit 18 made it difficult for individual prisoners in establishing and maintaining relations with the broader rural community. Even while working on the road crews, inmates were instructed to stay in one’s societal role. A correctional officer often supervised the prison laborers while out in the community to “make sure the men don’t mess with the public, and that the public doesn’t bother the men.”⁸⁰ Inmates were usually prohibited from speaking to members of the general public while working in the community or purchasing items in local stores unless accompanied by correctional personnel. One inmate states that this felt like a violation, taking away their freedom of speech.⁸¹ As noted by the highway superintendent, “going into a store, they aren’t allowed to go in there alone and they supposed to stay in their place for prison life”

⁷⁸ Angela Y. Davis, “Are Prisons Obsolete?” (New York: *Seven Stories Press*) 2003, p. 22-59.

⁷⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at WCCF Unit 18,” 1977.

⁸⁰ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

⁸¹ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18: Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

while out in the community.⁸² Several of the inmates specifically mentioned the disconnect with the broader community that was forced upon them through Unit 18 regulations and policies.

The MCT reporter responded to the highway supervisor by saying “it seems to me that the more contact they had with the people out here [in the community] the better it's going to be in a way when they do get out.” The highway superintendent replied with “well I’d say it would.”⁸³ The MCT reporter and the highway supervisor expressed support of further inclusion for the prisoners into the community, yet correctional policies and stereotypes fostered negative perceptions of prisoners, which limited the possibilities for further inclusion into the broader community. However, the highway supervisor also regularly reinforced correctional policies that restricted further community relations in direct contradiction to his personal opinion about expanding community relations with prisoners from Unit 18.⁸⁴

From the interviews with Captain Boyd, Roy Baker and other personnel from Unit 18, it’s evident that the two primary priorities at the facility from the perspective of the administration were security and the regular labor performed by the incarcerated men in the community.⁸⁵ An incarcerated African American male expressed his opinions on the administration’s priorities by saying that “I don’t think that security is the reason, the administration doesn’t take the time or have enough interest in our beings and in our welfare while we’re here. Their main priorities are countin’ us and locking us up.”⁸⁶ This particular comment addresses the many grievances the incarcerated population had towards the administration of Unit 18. The institutional framework of the Virginia Department of Corrections

⁸² Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Boyd”, 1977.

⁸³ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Boyd”, 1977.

⁸⁴ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18: Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

⁸⁵ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Captain Boyd”, 1977.

⁸⁶ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Unit 18”, 1977.

was designed more to count inmates and lock them up rather than rehabilitate criminal offenders from the perspective of incarcerated people from Unit 18.⁸⁷ The incarcerated men understood the administration's priorities from a different perspective, directly suffering the consequences of the prison system for imprisoned people.⁸⁸

The administration of Unit 18 and the incarcerated population in Wise, Virginia had different, and often opposing opinions about rehabilitation programs and correctional policies. Yet, most agreed on the necessity of strengthening the relationship between the general public of Wise with the incarcerated population at Unit 18. The purposes for strengthening community relations varied depending upon the group. The administration sought to rebuild the relationship with the community after several members of the community petitioned for the removal of the prison due to the lack of security and history of escape attempts.⁸⁹ The correctional administration of Unit 18 depended on local support from the community to stay in the area, and potentially expand correctional facilities.⁹⁰ In contrast, the incarcerated population at Unit 18 expressed the belief that community inclusion would lead to greater opportunities for rehabilitation in terms of educational and vocational training programs and in terms of improvements to their living conditions in prison, and subsequent lives after prison.⁹¹ Both groups pursued a stronger working relationship with the rural community of Wise, which set the stage for the relief efforts of the April flood of 1977 to become a major turning point for community relations.⁹²

⁸⁷ Mountain Community Television, "Prisoners at Unit 18", 1977.

⁸⁸ Robert T. Chase, "Cell Taught, Self Taught: The Chicano Movement Behind Bars- Urban Chicanos, Rural Prisons, and the Prisoners' Rights Movement", *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 4, No. 5, p. 836-861.

⁸⁹ Mountain Community Television, "Roy Baker and Inside St.", 1977.

⁹⁰ Mountain Community Television, "Interview with Captain Boyd", 1977.

⁹¹ Mountain Community Television, "Prisoners at Unit 18", 1977.

⁹² Brett Story, *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power Across Neoliberal America*, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, p. 79-104.

Shift in Community Attitudes After April Flood of 1977: *When they provide free labor, “then you find out they are victims of circumstances just like everybody else”*

After the flood and the efforts made by the incarcerated men from the Unit 18 facility, some community members changed their opinions. This section explores how shifting opinions about Unit 18 mostly centered local elites and those who benefited from prison labor directly. The disaster relief efforts performed by prisoner labor varied by location in the community. Generally, incarcerated men from Unit 18 were “digging out ditches, pumping out water, and tearing down buildings” in the aftermath of the April flood.⁹³ Whether the relief orders were issued by county officials, local leaders, or the state of Virginia is unclear. Nevertheless, an African American inmate recalled that he volunteered to help the community after the flood, saying “when we had the flood, I was one of the first ones to go, I volunteered to go. I worked down there at Coeburn Lumber Company for a couple of weeks, helping them get the place cleaned up.”⁹⁴ The manager of the Coeburn Lumber Company also stated how “the men from Unit 18 came out to help us clean up our buildings and our yard. Where the flood had been and they worked about three weeks or a little longer with us.”⁹⁵ The Wise Countian business owner also recalled how “they even worked on Saturday and Sunday because they strictly volunteered to work on Saturday and Sunday to help us. I was very pleased with them.” Another African American inmate also remembered how “last month, the flood washed out the bridge and we had to put in that bridge, we were working ten hours a day then.”⁹⁶ Inmates from Unit 18 specified

⁹³ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Unit 18”, 1977.

⁹⁴ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Unit 18”, 1977.

⁹⁵ Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St.”, 1977.

⁹⁶ Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St.”, 1977.

that they volunteered in the aftermath of the April flood as a civic duty, yet local business owners were the only members of Wise who acknowledged their community contributions.⁹⁷

These MCT interviews demonstrate an example of how incarcerated men from Unit 18 interacted with and volunteered for the community of Wise, Virginia. The incarcerated men from Unit 18 volunteered to help community members of Wise in the aftermath of the April flood, regardless of how the residents of Wise had viewed the prison or prisoners previously. Unit 18 inmates stated that they volunteered to highlight their own autonomy and readiness in disaster relief efforts. Incarcerated men sacrificed daily wages and personal time that could have been spent in educational programs or vocational training. Inmates worked ten hours a day to return community roads and bridges back to normal after the flood.⁹⁸ A limited number of community members directly benefited from the disaster relief efforts of Unit 18 since the incarcerated men primarily worked for the Coeburn Lumber Company, the local pavement company, or the regional highway department. The community members who directly benefited from prison laborers were the interviewees who advocated for more inclusion for prisoners into the broader community of Wise.⁹⁹

In the late 1970s, local business owners and correctional administration at Unit 18 had formed a local coalition to improve community relations with the correctional facility and incarcerated population for the purpose of expanding prison labor in the region. Basic attitudes towards prisoners in the community had started to change amongst local business owners.¹⁰⁰ A MCT reporter asked the Coeburn Lumber Company owner “did you have different attitudes towards prisoners than what you have now?” The lumber yard owner responded “I came out with

⁹⁷ Thompson, “Rethinking Working-Class Struggle through the Lens of the Carceral State”, p. 32-35.

⁹⁸ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

⁹⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18: Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

¹⁰⁰ Huling, “Building a Prison Economy in Rural America”, p. 4-5.

a completely different attitude than what I had before because you know you have ideas of what people like that are like because of where they are at, but then you find out they are victims of circumstances just like everybody else. I feel like I have some real fine friends out there now.”¹⁰¹ The member of the Wise community explicitly stated that his opinions about prisons and inmates had changed significantly since the help of Unit 18 in the aftermath of the April flood. Though the Lumber yard manager viewed prisoners of Unit 18 as “victims of circumstances” or “real fine friends,” he was one of the community members of Wise who directly benefited from the exploitation of prison laborers in the community.¹⁰²

Other business owners went further than advocating for just inclusion into the community; some local business owners wanted more cooperation with prisoners and job training programs to utilize their experiences in manual labor. A concrete and pavement company owner in Wise remarked that “I think we should cooperate with the prisoners, it’s excellent to have training programs. We run a store and are in the paving business, we’ve got three or four boys from the penitentiaries who work for us now.” The MCT reporter quickly asked “so you don’t mind hiring them?” The man replied “no not at all, I’d hire one right now if he qualifies. We own the paving company so I’d like to hire eight or ten of them, they sure know how to work.”¹⁰³ This particular Wise County business owner advocated for more cooperation between the community and the prisoners from Unit 18 since he utilized their labor to continue his business enterprises. The partnership between incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals with manual labor companies was the most common relationship in the

¹⁰¹ Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St.”, 1977.

¹⁰² Mountain Community Television, “Roy Baker and Inside St.”, 1977.

¹⁰³ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18: Street and Road Crews”, 1977.

community.¹⁰⁴ The business owners often advocated for training programs without directly mentioning rehabilitation or educational programs.

While the labor that was enacted after the Great Appalachian Flood influenced how business owners viewed the incarcerated workers' labor, Unit 18 had already been providing labor in the community that had gone ignored. This work was contracted by the state of Virginia, unlike the volunteerism that occurred in the wake of the flood. Men from Unit 18 were regularly required to work with highway road crews and community projects in the area as documented by MCT.¹⁰⁵ Before the flood, Captain Boyd labeled Unit 18 as “ a working unit, we go out on the road and work for the highway department every day.”¹⁰⁶ A road crew supervisor with “a thirty year career on chain gangs” remarked that “Mr. Boyd hands the boys down to us every morning” to work with the regional highway department.¹⁰⁷

However, most of this work was unacknowledged beyond the businesses who benefited from the work directly. Stereotypes and fears about prison life and prisoners continued to prevail in the broader residential community.¹⁰⁸ Dominant stereotypes about prisoners and prison life of the 1970s were frequently discussed in the MCT interviews including NIMBY sentiments, fear of violence or property theft as well as the concern over drug abuse in and outside of prisons.¹⁰⁹ All of these stereotypes followed the men of Unit 18 when they were in the community before and after the April flood. Most of the labor performed by Unit 18 in the Wise community returned to normal after the flood disaster relief efforts were completed. Incarcerated men from

¹⁰⁴ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, p. 21-29.

¹⁰⁵ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

¹⁰⁶ Mountain Community Television, “Interview with Captain Boyd”, 1977.

¹⁰⁷ Mountain Community Television, “Road Crew and Prison Yard”, 1977.

¹⁰⁸ Heather Ann Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History.” *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (2010): 703-734.

¹⁰⁹ Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, “The Attila the Hun Law’: New York’s Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Making of a Punitive State,” *Journal of Social History* (September 2010): 71-96

Unit 18 expressed their discontent with labor and correctional policies, which in their view limited their full inclusion into the community as well as their personal rehabilitation. With all of the work that had been done by the incarcerated men after they labored in flood relief efforts, the continuing exclusion from the community (beyond business owners who profited from their labor) was discouraging to the members of Unit 18. Some of the incarcerated men acknowledged their frustration with the lack of rehabilitation and community-centered programs offered to the prisoners, in conjunction with the continuation of their exploited labor.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Mountain Community Television, "Street and Road Crew", 1977.

Prison Laborers Reflect on Their Work in the Community of Wise

Prison laborers quickly resumed their road work in the community of Wise following the three to four weeks that they volunteered for disaster relief. This section offers a more detailed understanding of inmates' reactions to their exploited labor and their volunteerism after the flood. The inmates at Unit 18 expressed their frustrations with the labor they were performing in the community in a variety of ways. Some of the incarcerated men explicitly stated how they felt about their work, while others did not directly complain to MCT reporters but said "we may do a lousy job at times, but we don't complain none."¹¹¹ Underperforming one's required tasks was one way to show dissatisfaction and rebel against the administration at Unit 18 or their employers in Wise. Another effective way for inmates to communicate their frustrations was through the MCT reporters on the streets of Wise. Both actions could lead to further discipline from the administration of Unit 18. As a white inmate explained "a lot of the things inmates aren't really allowed to say out here because regardless of what we say, we go back inside, we still going to catch a lot of static from the staff on it."¹¹²

While sweeping a downtown street in Wise County, an African American inmate from Lynchburg, Virginia criticized the divisions of labor for prisoners expressing that they were "taking the place of a machine... We always taking the place of a machine."¹¹³ The reporter goes on to ask the inmate sweeping the road, "how do you feel about the work you're doing?" The man quickly responded "I don't think we should be doing it, for what we do and the pay we get it doesn't make sense, a machine could sweep and take care of this road but instead they use

¹¹¹ Mountain Community Television, "Road Crew and Prison Yard", 1977.

¹¹² Mountain Community Television, "Criminal Justice/Unit 18", 1977.

¹¹³ Mountain Community Television, "Street and Road Crew", 1977.

men.”¹¹⁴ This particular inmate was outwardly upset with the division of labor required of him and others while imprisoned at Unit 18. Wise County lacked appropriate machinery to take care of the road system. Instead of investing in adequate equipment, the community officials had incarcerated men from the local correctional facility maintain the methods of transportation for the area. This exploitation of labor was presented as a positive investment in the community and for the prisoners. However, the incarcerated men recognized this as one of the many forms of exploitation they experienced while imprisoned in Unit 18. This type of labor was not for the betterment of themselves, but a way around paying adequate wages to community members seeking employment or spending local funds on community investment.¹¹⁵

A major issue with the required labor of incarcerated people was how low their wages were in comparison to state employees performing the same work in the late 1970s. An African American inmate exclaimed that “I get paid seventy-five cents a day, and that’s top pay too.”¹¹⁶ When asked how he felt about his wages by an MCT reporter he said “I think I should get paid what the state gets paid, I do the same job as the state department do, everything that the roadmen do, the highway department claimed they do but we end up doing it.”¹¹⁷ This particular inmate was clearly aware of the exploitation of his labor as evidenced by his conversation with an MCT reporter. He continued by saying that “we pave the highways, sweep the roads, we do the work, they get the pay.”¹¹⁸ Several of the incarcerated men from Unit 18 expressed their negative opinions on the low wages they received despite performing the same tedious manual labor as state highway employees. The incarcerated man quoted here continued similar

¹¹⁴ Mountain Community Television, “Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

¹¹⁵ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 2007.

¹¹⁶ Mountain Community Television, “Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

¹¹⁷ Mountain Community Television, “Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

¹¹⁸ Mountain Community Television, “Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

sentiments as other inmates. The work that was done was often valued through specific wages, but because the work was done by prison laborers, the value decreased significantly. A white inmate stated that “the people we work for, they said they’d rather have the prisoners work for them rather than anybody else cause we did more work and better work for them.”¹¹⁹

A highway supervisor expressed that the imprisoned men were not different from the average worker, except “just the prison part about it, you know. I don’t think there is a bit of difference from no other one person. I just believe when they have been locked up for so long they have problems when they come back out on the street.”¹²⁰ This understanding was that incarcerated men were performing the same labor as the average worker, but with the added consequences of being imprisoned. An important topic that kept recurring in the MCT interviews with Unit 18 inmates was the issue of inadequate wages received for the labor they contributed to the Wise community. Without adequate wages, the Unit 18 prisoners were experiencing the contradictions of the U.S. penal system directly. Unit 18 inmates had to decide between low wages for labor or participation in rehabilitation programs offered by the prison.

In 1977, the state of Virginia’s minimum wage was two dollars and thirty cents an hour, significantly higher than the seventy-cent a day wage of incarcerated laborers in Wise.¹²¹ Incarcerated men were paid seventy-five cents a day averaging around ten hours of labor a day.¹²² Yet, they did not receive all seventy-five cents at the same time when paid for labor. An African American inmate from Martinsville, Virginia was unloading bags of cement for the Wise State Shop when he told an MCT reporter asking about wages that, “they hold a quarter of that

¹¹⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

¹²⁰ Mountain Community Television, “Road Crew and Prison Yard”, 1977.

¹²¹ U.S. Department of Labor, “History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938-2009, accessed at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history/chart>.

¹²² Mountain Community Television, “Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

each day so you get fifty cents, they hold a quarter back for when you get out.”¹²³ The unloading of bags of cement was a continuation of work needed in the community following the April flood for highways, bridges, and sidewalks.¹²⁴ The incarcerated man claimed he usually worked around ten hours a day Monday through Friday. The MCT reporter then asked the prison laborer if they received any overtime pay for the long hours worked in the community, the inmate openly laughed before saying “nah just the seventy-five cents a day.”¹²⁵ The MCT reporter asked the African American prison laborer “would you like the work a little more if you got paid more?” The African American inmate responded with “yes I would, I think we should cause sometimes we’re on some rough jobs.”¹²⁶

Most of the prisoners acknowledged the community’s disinterest and general divide of opinions in Wise about their presence. The exploitation of labor not only contributed to the troubled relationship with the broader community, but also had detrimental effects on incarcerated men once they were released from Unit 18. An incarcerated African American said that “the community is okay, some of the people don’t care, some people want to see you out here but that’s the whole thing they prefer you out here sweeping the road rather than trying to get educated or learn a trade.”¹²⁷ This particular inmate addressed the disconnect between ideas of rehabilitation and general punishment. He was aware that the more time that he spent performing manual labor for the community was in exchange for and in sacrifice of the time that he could have been spending acquiring an educational degree or vocational training to help secure employment once released. He continued by saying that “we are supposed to be in here

¹²³ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

¹²⁴ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

¹²⁵ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

¹²⁶ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

¹²⁷ Mountain Community Television, “Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

for rehabilitation, but after I leave the prison all I did was sweep roads, dig ditches, what kind of trade is there to go back to?... they're continuing to make me a misfit they don't offer me anything as far as trade is concerned.”¹²⁸

This African American from Unit 18 was especially discontent with the lack of vocational training offered to him from the correctional facility. He acknowledged that if he was not adequately trained in a vocational trade or educated while imprisoned, then rehabilitation efforts ultimately failed. His economic status would still require him to be a “misfit” to be engaged with illegal activities for basic survival once released. The incarcerated men at Unit 18 felt as if they were punished multiple times for the same crime. An African American inmate explained how “after you get in prison, you're punished all over again, you're locked away and then you're sent out here to be punished, if you don't do the work the way they feel it should be done then you're punished again.”¹²⁹ Many of the incarcerated men viewed their labor in the community as another form of punishment for the same crime. Since the incarcerated men viewed their labor in the community as an added layer of punishment, their reflections about their exploitation motivated them to have greater desires for fulfilling educational programs and building stronger coalitions with the host community of Wise. Centering rehabilitation, the men of Unit 18 recognized what steps would be most beneficial to them once they were no longer imprisoned.¹³⁰

Educational programs were started under Captain Boyd at Unit 18 in 1976. Captain Boyd noted that “when I arrived we had no programs for the prisoners of any kind since that time we have put in several different types of programs. Arts and crafts, schooling programs, more

¹²⁸ Mountain Community Television, “Criminal Justice/Unit 18”, 1977.

¹²⁹ Mountain Community Television, “Street and Road Crew”, 1977.

¹³⁰ Mountain Community Television, “Unit 18 Prisoners Talk about Prison Life”, 1977.

recreational activities...” The educational programs were often cited as a highlight for many of the incarcerated men from Unit 18, in stark contrast to how prisoners discussed their labor in the community. The incarcerated man from Unit 18 who was sweeping the roads said “we have a pretty good schooling program. I go to school but I’m still out here sweeping. I completed the whole thing, I got a degree but I’m still out here digging ditches and sweeping the roads.” This statement by a working prisoner highlights the flaws of minimum rehabilitation programs that prioritize prison labor over general welfare of the incarcerated population.¹³¹

As pointed out by the inmate in the previous quotation, the school programs for inmates were not without issues. An African American male, who also worked in the flood, explained that “at the present time, I think the best thing we have is the schooling program....People here are enrolled in school....If an individual here [at Unit 18] takes four courses, he still has to work, you see. There might be two reasons why he might have to work, one of the reasons is that the administration might compel him to work. The second reason he might have to work is because he might not have any income.”¹³² This situation was created by the prison systems’ interest in prison laborers, over interests in rehabilitation. The inmate goes on to explain “His hands are tied there. If there was something to help a student towards vocational rehabilitation like financial aid along with a lot of other things, I think it would be in a lot of people’s best interest here.”¹³³ This inmate also said that he was currently in school, but only because the road crew he worked for had been “cancelled for some reason after the flood.”¹³⁴ The education that may benefit inmates once released was not prioritized while incarcerated because of the regulated labor established by

¹³¹ Volker Janssen, “When the ‘Jungle’ Met the Forest: Public Work, Civil Defense, and Prison Camps in Postwar California”, *The Journal of American History* Vol. 96, No. 3 (December 2009), p. 702-726.

¹³² Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Unit 18”, 1977.

¹³³ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Unit 18,” 1977.

¹³⁴ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Unit 18,” 1977.

Unit 18 and the Wise community. Strict policies and regulations did not stop prisoners from envisioning a better relationship with the community of Wise.

Several of the incarcerated men at Unit 18 offered possible solutions to improve the community relations with Wise County residents, despite the general hostility and disinterest from the general public. An African American inmate suggested that the administration of Unit 18 should offer “an open house once a month or once every two to three weeks that way people could come in and tour the place and just sit down and discuss what people here have in mind about rehabilitation and from that point maybe we could put up something better than what we have.”¹³⁵ This incarcerated individual clearly expressed his desire to meet and discuss with the community members of Wise County on a regular basis in an effort to improve the community relations as well as the rehabilitation programs at Unit 18. Going beyond ideas surrounding labor in the community, the incarcerated man offers ideas that would lead to direct engagement. This could have potentially helped bridge that gap to community members, which was so readily exploited by business owners in the community. The involvement of Unit 18 in the community was decided by the business owners. If community members had engaged, the involvement would have revolved around more than labor or profit margins.¹³⁶ The aspirations expressed by the incarcerated population were not met even after disaster relief work was completed.

The primary focus for the incarcerated men was improving community relations and expanding the rehabilitation programs at Unit 18. The purpose of a better relationship with the community was quite different from the “tremendous working relationship” envisioned by Counselor Roy Baker, Unit 18 administrative personnel or local business owners.¹³⁷ The efforts

¹³⁵ Mountain Community Television, “Prisoners at Unit 18,” 1977.

¹³⁶ Sam Adler-Bell, “Appalachia vs. the Carceral State”, *The New Republic*, Nov. 25, 2019.

¹³⁷ Mountain Community Television, “Employees at Unit 18”, 1977.

of Unit 18 prisoners were similar to the larger prisoners' rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s.¹³⁸ Yet, the prisoners at Unit 18 did not engage in work strikes or civil rights protests like many other prisoners across the country in the era.¹³⁹ Rather than collectively organizing, they attempted to negotiate and build relationships with the host community of Wise.

These conversations with inmates give a more complete perspective of how prison labor was used in Virginia. The MCT reporters documented the role of prisoners in the aftermath of the Great Appalachian Flood of 1977 and allowed incarcerated people a chance to speak on their experiences. Without the interviews conducted by MCT reporters, the role of Unit 18 inmates in the flood and after the flood would have been lost to the historical record. It is important to emphasize that the incarcerated men from Unit 18 volunteered to participate in disaster relief efforts in the community following the early April flood. This was the language Unit 18 inmates used in the MCT interviews to describe their work in the community after the flood. Most of the relief work completed by incarcerated men were directed towards private businesses such as the Coeburn Lumber Company, Wise State Shop, and regional pavement company. After disaster relief was completed, incarcerated men from Unit 18 continued to repair roadways and bridges through their work with the Virginia State Highway Department. This type of work, beyond the disaster relief, was required of the prisoners because Unit 18 was designated as a working prison camp. Though much of their labor is required, prisoner laborers had hoped to change the community's perceptions of them through their volunteer work in response to the April flood.

Ultimately, the labor of incarcerated men would become a greater resource for the federal and state governments as well as local elites than the extracted resources from the natural

¹³⁸ Robert T. Chase, "Cell Taught Self Taught: The Chicano Movement Behind Bars - Urban Chicanos, Rural Prisons, and the Prisoners' Rights Movement." *Journal of Urban History* vol. 41, no. 4 (2015): 836-861.

¹³⁹ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, p. 89-115.

landscape.¹⁴⁰ The expansion of the penal industrial complex in central Appalachia was a continuation of underdevelopment for the region since it was a way for local elites and state legislatures to diminish attempts of unionization or social unrest amidst the global restructuring of capitalism in the late 1970s.¹⁴¹ Unit 18 inmates volunteered for manual labor for nearly seven days a week for three or more weeks in grueling conditions of flood aftermath in 1977, yet most of their experiences and history has been excluded from the official story of the Great Appalachian Flood of 1977. The April flood forced rural communities and small towns in central Appalachia to rely on the existing institutions and people in the region for relief. For Wise, Virginia, that institution was Wise County Correctional Facility Unit 18, a branch of the larger Virginia Department of Corrections, and the people were the incarcerated men from Unit 18.

¹⁴⁰ Tom Butler, *Plundering Appalachia: The Tragedy of Mountaintop-Removal Coal Mining*, Earth Aware Editions, 2009.

¹⁴¹ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, The New Press, 2010.

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