

URANIUM TAILINGS



Burst dam spills nuclear waste

By Christopher McLeod

CHURCH ROCK, N. M.

This high desert country of red rock cliffs and open sky—home to Navajo Indians and hundreds of uranium miners—is the unlikely site of America's latest nuclear "event."

Early on the morning of July 16th—the morning after President Carter made his comprehensive energy speech without ever mentioning nuclear power—an earthen dam at United Nuclear Corporation's uranium mill split open and released 100 million gallons of acidic, radioactive water into the Rio Puerco, a tributary of the Little Colorado River. The water flashflooded through Gallup, New Mexico, overflowing the river bank in several places, and went 50 miles into Arizona before it was absorbed into the bed of the dry desert wash.

Eleven hundred tons of radioactive mud, rocks and sand—the waste products of uranium milling—also escaped through the 20-foot breach in the 6,000-foot long dam. Clean-up crews using buckets and shovels as well as bulldozers have been able to retrieve only 140 tons of the escaped material for return to the "tailings pond." The rest has washed down the Rio Puerco.

The New Mexico Environmental Improvement Division (EID), immediately issued a "hazard warning" to the 21,000 residents of Gallup 10 miles downstream from the mill. The local population has been warned not to drink the water from the river and to keep their animals away from the contaminated area. EID test results show high levels of radioactive thorium 230, uranium, radium and lead in Rio Puerco water, and the EID awaits the results of 30 soil samples taken on the day of the spill.

The EID has shut down the United Nuclear mill until the spill has been satisfactorily cleaned up and the cause of the breach is determined. Tom Buhl, of

the EID's radiation unit, estimated the mill will remain closed "for weeks, maybe months." There has been no official explanation of the cause of the dam's failure.

Official calm.

Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) official Hubert Miller, who is monitoring the accident for the NRC, says, "It appears to be one of the most severe dam failures to occur, in terms of consequences." However, Miller did not expect any health impacts after the spill is cleaned-up.

"Mill tailings are not the kind of thing we had at Three Mile Island," he says. "It's different, by orders of magnitude, in potential health effects. Mill-tailings are only low-level radiation. It's stuff that has to be contained, but it's stuff that's in your backyard. You've got uranium and radium and thorium in ordinary soil. In this case its 500 times more concentrated, but it's not millions like in a reactor."

Gallup mayor Wayne Lewis says the public reaction to the dam break has been hardly noticeable. "We've worked around this stuff for 30 years," he says. "We live with it all the time, and no one has been greatly concerned about it."

Nevertheless, waste material from uranium mining is one of the largest and least publicized waste disposal problems in the entire nuclear fuel cycle. The uranium ore mined at Church Rock contains only .2 per cent uranium. The rest of the rock material—3,800 tons a day containing 85 per cent of the original radioactivity in the form of radium—are the "tailings."

Uranium tailings have traditionally been disposed of by piling them around the mill. In the 50s and 60s, Navajos were encouraged to build houses and schools out of tailings materials, until health officials began to note an increase in Indian cancer rates. Today, most tailings are eventually either buried or covered

to prevent the escape of radon gas.

There are 140 million tons of tailings around the United States, representing the largest mass of radioactive material in the country. And, like reactor waste, the tailings will be dangerous for hundreds of thousands of years.

Public concern.

The Church Rock spill could have a profound impact on the future plans for uranium development in northwestern New Mexico, where there is growing

public apprehension about the environmental impact of uranium mining.

The Church Rock area, known as the Grants uranium belt, supplies about half of the United States uranium supply for reactors, weapons and export. There are already 34 uranium mines and 5 mills in the area, and with the recent jump in the price of uranium from \$6 a pound in 1972 to more than \$55 a pound in 1979, another round of uranium fever is under way. The Department of the Interior has called it "the hottest uranium exploration spot in the United States." Exxon, Mobil, Phillips, Kerr-McGee and United Nuclear have drilled 35,000 exploratory holes in the desert. Up to 75 new mines and 20 new mills may open in the next decade.

The tailings pond spill, however, could have a profound impact on these plans. Until now, opposition to uranium development has come primarily from the Navajos, under whose land most of the undeveloped uranium is buried. One hundred local Navajos have joined with Friends of the Earth to file suit against every agency in the United States government involved in the production of "yellowcake," as the processed uranium is called. The list includes the Departments of Energy, Interior and Agriculture, the NRC, the EPA, and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

The plaintiffs claim that the agencies have violated the National Environmental Act (NEPA) by failing to prepare national, regional and site-specific Environmental Impact Statements for the proposed uranium development north of Church Rock. NEPA requires environmental impact statements for all "major federal actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment."

The suit claims that the new mines will use about 40,000 acre feet of water a year, lowering the water table 150 feet and endangering local drinking water. It also charges that mine vents and tailings piles will discharge radioactive radon gas into the atmosphere for decades.

Battle lines have already formed in Church Rock over the suit. Those tied to the uranium business for their livelihood have formed the Energy Association of Taxpayers to fight the suit. EAT chairman Ignacio Salazar, a driller, says that if the Navajos are successful, "We could be shut down for 15 or 20 years while the government considers all those impact statements. It could be a disaster, not only for us, but for the entire country."

Navajos and Hopi who live in the area point out that the Church Rock dam broke just one hour before preliminary hearings in the case were to begin in Washington. In addition, the Navajos contend that uranium development will bring 50,000 more whites to the area, threatening the traditional Indian culture.

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for the network's gloomy prospects.

Even if it did have some hot series in the works, the laws of scheduling would preclude their being aired, given the network's weak line-up. As Fred Silverman recently explained to a gathering of advertisers and their agencies, "When you introduce half-hour comedies, it behooves you to put those comedies in a very safe position in the schedule. To throw a couple of comedies on the schedule opposite a *Charlie's Angels* or *Happy Days* or *Love Boat* is suicide. I think that if we can't learn some lessons from mistakes that we've made in the past, then the whole process becomes very silly."

Of course, some observers would claim that the scheduling process itself is rather silly. Programs are brought on air not because they provide "flow" to the night's programming, or because they "hammock" nicely with existing shows. And the networks are increasingly reluctant to experiment with new program formats.

Each ratings point in prime-time network TV now translates into some \$35 million in annual revenues. With such high stakes, the networks are impatient for a return on their investment. Even though the average-series now costs about \$300,000 per half-hour segment to produce, series that don't prove themselves early are not likely to get much opportunity to build a following gradually.

Fall TV

Continued from back page

The network is also revising the way it positions its new programs. Last year, the network sought to head off ABC through "counterprogramming"—airing shows that attract a different audience than do the competition's offerings. Last fall, for instance, it aired the critically-acclaimed *Paper Chase* opposite *Happy Days* and *Laverne & Shirley*, in an effort to siphon off viewers unimpressed with ABC's pitch to adolescents. This season, however, it is going after what Grant succinctly terms the "ABC audience"—teenagers and women 18-49 years old. *Paper Chase*'s place will be taken by *California Fever*. And ABC's saccharine *Eight Is Enough* will be countered by *Working Stiffs* and *The Last Resort*, sitcoms of the most sophomoric kind.

No way to play.

And what of NBC? Sy Amlen, ABC vice president for entertainment, says that "NBC doesn't even enter the picture at the present time." NBC's ability to engage in schedule-juggling is limited, given the few successful shows it has to juggle. It is offering no new sitcoms this fall—which is perhaps the chief reason

ART & ENTERTAINMENT

BOOKS

How the union came to be in Harlan County

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?
THE HARLAN COUNTY
COAL MINERS, 1901-89.

By John H. Hevener
University of Illinois Press, \$10.95

By Don Reid

Florence Reece's rendition of "Which Side Are You On?" in Barbara Kopple's film, *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, is a stirring reminder that Harlan County Miners have fought for a union contract before. As John Hevener points out in his new book, *Which Side Are You On?*, understanding what has happened in Harlan in the past helps ex-

plain the situation of Harlan's miners in the seventies. In a clear and straightforward manner, Hevener chronicles the repeated attempts during the 30s to unionize the region's miners. He concludes that pressure exerted by Washington was the key element in the UMW's eventual success in Harlan County.

Harlan County's rich coal deposits remained unexploited until the twentieth century. The mining industry grew in leaps and bounds during the teens and 20s and by the next decade 40-odd companies were extracting coal in the county. Operators paid lower wages than their competitors and used their economic and political clout to keep out the UMW. In the 20s and 30s three strikes of Harlan County's production came from "captive mines," owned by outside coal consumers like Ford and International Harvester.

Sanitary and medical conditions were abysmal. A county board of health was not established until 1942, when it was discovered that more than one-third of the county's first class of drafters suffered from venereal disease. Violence marked local life. Even before the strikes of the 30s spread its reputation as "Bloody Harlan" nationwide, the county boasted the nation's highest homicide rate.

The mines were staffed with men drawn from poor farms in the area. Many workers lived in company housing, which was taken away from them if they attempted to unionize, and shop-keepers and company stores. A substantial portion of the county's population was employed in the mines and related industries.

The violence that resurfaced in this era of economic decline was not restricted to management/worker confrontations. Officials of the UMW's District 19, which includes Harlan County, helped to plan and finance the murder of UMW president Tony Boyle's opponent, Joseph A. "Jock" Yablonski. The rejuvenation of the UMW in the area has not been easy; the Brookside strike of 1973-1974 filmed by Barbara Kopple was a significant step in the reorganization of Harlan's miners.

The deputies were supplemented by company detectives, directed by an unsavory deputy with the expressive name of Ben Unthank. Murders during the 1931 strike

of Harlan County. The sheriff had 170 deputies: most acted as mineguards and received their salaries from the companies. After her house had been raided by Sheriff J.H. Blair's deputies, Florence Reece expressed her anger in a song:

*If you go to Harlan County
There is no neutral there.
You'll either be a union man
Or a thug for J.H. Blair.
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?*

How and why.

Hevener's study raises several questions for future research about the place of the union in Harlan County society. In explaining why early organizing efforts failed, Hevener presents a portrait of the typical Harlan miner of the 20s: "A first-generation industrial worker drawn from the impoverished hillside farms of the surrounding region, he possessed a fiercely independent spirit and had not yet accepted the idea of permanent working-class status. The new housing and bustling activity of the coal camp was superior to the isolated mountain cabin he had fled." Under the impact of the Depression, the appeal of the company-based community wore thin and workers strove to organize themselves.

What role did the union play in this regrouping process? Hevener suggests an answer when discussing Harlan County's abnormally high homicide rate. He attributes the region's violence to the breakdown of the family during the transition from agriculture to mining. Through such strike tactics as picketing, armed marches and the dynamiting of mine machinery, "the union... presents itself as a viable, powerful institution, impressing some and intimidating others... Such activities give every striker a role to play and bolster morale."

It appears that the union help-



ed to create the basis for a new community in Harlan County, but the mechanism behind this process remains unclear. In particular, we get little idea of what happened within union locals in Harlan County.

Did the UMW introduce new values into the community or reinforce existing ones? In what ways did the UMW, strong among recent immigrants in the North, have to adapt to life in Harlan County? Was there a change in the Harlan miners' view of their position in America as a result of the strikes of the thirties? Despite the existence of several "captive mines" in Harlan County, Harlan mine operators and a good number of their

workers saw the UMW in the 20s as an institution that defended the interests of northern mines and miners. How did the Depression and the establishment of the UMW in Harlan in the 30s alter local miners' views of themselves as workers and as Americans?

Hevener's coverage of individual strikes and the formation of the union is both engrossing and important. The writing is exciting and fast-paced as well. But although Hevener offers an explanation of the dynamics of Harlan County society before unionization, he presents only a sketchy picture of the results of the establishment of the UMW on local mining communities. ■

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CULTURE SHOCK

consumed every 21 minutes on television. And the drinking is heaviest during situation comedies.

HUMAN NEW BARS

The New York Times reports the latest poll says in 1979, "Balding, bearded, you're the new ideal man."

WHEN DO THE QUESTS

—one for herself and one for her dog.

BOOZE TUBE

...and the drinking is heaviest during situation comedies.