

Historic Truth, Ballad Truth, and the Truth of Oral
Memorate: a Study of the Floyd County,
Kentucky, School Bus Disaster

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This study is dedicated to the students in my classes in folklore at Morehead State University, who have found for me many of the ballads of the Floyd County School bus disaster; to Mary Griffie Caudill, a good friend and a fellow student of folklore; and to the memory of the twenty-six Floyd County school children and their school bus driver who perished in the disaster.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. | 1 |
| I. RECORDED HISTORY OF THE FLOYD COUNTY, KENTUCKY, SCHOOL BUS DISASTER | 2 |
| II. THE BALLADS OF THE DISASTER | 12 |
| "The Big Sandy Disaster," V. H. Harp. | 12 |
| "The Wreck of the Floyd County School Bus," Anonymous. | 22 |
| "No School Bus In Heaven," Jack Adkins and Buddy Dee. | 28 |
| "Kentucky School Bus," Hobo Jack Adkins | 31 |
| "Tragedy of School Bus 27 (of Floyd Co., Ky.)," W. C. Burchett. | 35 |
| "The Yellow Tomb," A. L. Phipps | 43 |
| III. THE POEMS OF THE DISASTER | 50 |
| "Tragedy," Sp./3 Elmer F. Fields. | 51 |
| "A Group of Happy Children," Ilva Roth. | 52 |
| "The Schoolbus Wreck," Anonymous. | 55 |
| "Deepest Regret," Virginia Bates. | 56 |
| "In nineteen hundred fifty-eight....," Wallace J. Johnson, Sr. | 56 |
| "Dirge For Kentucky School Children," Clara Chassell Cooper | 57 |
| "Levisa Lament," Clara Chassell Cooper. | 58 |
| IV. ELEMENTS OF FOLKLORE AND THE SCHOOL BUS DISASTER. | 61 |
| V. TRANSCRIPTS OF THE TAPED INTERVIEWS | 73 |
| Mary Griffie Caudill. | 74 |
| Izaac Vanderpool. | 83 |
| Anna Sue Stumbo | 101 |
| James Smiley. | 116 |
| V. H. Harp. | 129 |
| CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY. | 152 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY. | 154 |

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study represents my first fieldwork in folklore. Because of the kindness of many individuals--students, fellow faculty, librarians, and those connected with the disaster--many aspects of the study have gone well and smoothly. Looking backwards, other aspects of the study should have gone better. The trial-and-error method is a great but unforgiving preceptor. My intention is that what I have learned in making this study I shall put to good and hard use in other endeavors.

The study became "the study" only during the last two years. Until 1978 I had been merely curious about a disaster ballad pertaining to a school bus wreck south of Prestonsburg, Kentucky, in 1958. When folklore students brought me recorded copies of two different ballads of the school bus disaster, neither of which was the ballad I had in printed form, mere curiosity became close scrutiny which, in turn, became systematic study and broadcasted interest.

Morehead State University and its Faculty Research Committee granted me a sum early in 1980 to help me finish research, travel to interviews, and make multiple photocopies of the results. For this aid and interest I am most appreciative.

I. Recorded History of the Floyd County, Kentucky, School Bus Disaster

This section of the study is a capsule history of the Floyd County school bus disaster as reported in local and national print media. The print media consulted are the Floyd County (Kentucky) Times, the Louisville Courier-Journal, the New York Times, Life, Time, and National Parent-Teacher. Rarely if ever is there coverage of the disaster in print media outside the Floyd County Times that is not to be found in the FCT itself, hence my almost exclusive reliance on FCT for this portion of the study.

Much of the coverage of the disaster in FCT, a weekly paper published in Prestonsburg, Kentucky, was written by two men: Henry P. (Buck) Scalf (who later received a meritorious service award for his reportage of the disaster) and Norman Allen, publisher and editor of FTC. Mr. Scalf died in 1979, and Mr. Allen remains publisher and editor. Unless otherwise noted, all dates and page references in parentheses are to FTC during 1958.

Shortly after 8:00 a.m. on Friday, February 28, 1958, northbound Floyd County school bus #27 struck the left rear of a wrecker on U.S. Route 23 at Knotley Hollow near Lancer, Kentucky, three miles south of the bus's destination, Prestonsburg. The driver, John Derossett, had apparently steered left in an attempt to avoid colliding with the wrecker. After the collision, the bus continued its swing to the left, teetered briefly on the edge of the southbound lane,¹ and plunged down a 50-foot-plus

¹It was later reported, correctly, that before the bus plunged down the embankment it also struck the left rear of an automobile parked off to the side of the southbound lane of U.S. Route 23.

embankment into the rain-swollen Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy River (3/6, p. 1; 3/13, p. 4).² Of the estimated 47 students on board, 26 and the driver went down with the bus. The other 21 managed to escape through the rear emergency door of the bus and either swam or were helped to safety.³ The location of the submerged bus was not discovered until after noon on Sunday, March 2.

Throughout the first day of the disaster, some 2000 individuals gathered along the river's banks to watch and wait. Floyd County Judge Henry Stumbo was placed in charge of recovery efforts. Rescue workers were organized locally; and later on Friday, Ashland Oil and Refining Company and the U.S. Corps of Engineers sent divers to the scene. The divers were later joined by U.S. Navy frogmen and U.S. Coast Guard personnel. U.S. Army helicopters and land vehicles of various sorts converged bringing supplies and equipment. The Red Cross established a canteen at the site early on Friday (3/6, p. 1).

Almost immediately boats of all sorts were on the river searching for the bus as individuals built fires along the banks of the Sandy to warm themselves. Grappling hooks were fashioned by welders on the highway above the river, and a barge was moored

²Life Magazine reported the water's depth at 30 feet (March 10, 1958, p. 46). The Louisville Courier-Journal reported that normally the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy River would have been only two feet deep (March 1, 1958, p. 1).

³There is some disagreement about the number of children who escaped the bus. Although 21 is the number referred to by FCT in various issues March through June, 1958, only 20 names of survivors are reported in the March 6 issue. The May 22 issue, however, reports that various school children were called upon as witnesses in the official probe of the disaster. Of those called upon, two children testified whose names do not appear on the March 6 list of survivors.

in the river for divers' use. State police, county police, and members of Co. B, 364th Engineer Battalion joined to help in the search, to direct traffic, and generally to maintain order (3/6, p. 1). On Saturday, March 1, Judge Stumbo appointed U.S. Coast Guard Lt. John Mundy to be in charge of the search operations. U.S. Representative Carl Perkins and Governor A. B. Chandler visited the site Saturday afternoon, and the Governor pledged the total resources of the State to aid in recovering victims' bodies. Lighting devices for night work were brought in by the "Glow Worm" unit of the 23rd Artillery Corps from Lexington, Kentucky (3/6, p. 1).

At 12:53 p.m. on Sunday, March 2, a diver spotted the body of one of the victims some 200 feet downstream near the opposite bank from the point at which the bus had entered the water. The body had apparently floated free of the bus. Almost immediately divers discovered the submerged bus lying on its side in fairly shallow water about 250 feet downstream and on the opposite bank from the bus's entry. Divers attached cables to the bus and to two bulldozers. At 3:25 p.m. the bus emerged, and by 4:30 it was pulled ashore with the help of a third bulldozer. Fourteen more bodies including that of the driver were recovered from the bus. Twelve children's bodies were still missing as of Sunday evening (3/6, p. 6) as 3000-4000 people watched the operations from the river's banks (3/6, p. 6; p. 8).

By Sunday night searchlights totaling 80 million candle-power were in use on the river (3/13, p. 8). National Guardsmen installed a net across the river at the West Prestonsburg Bridge (two miles downstream from the accident); two more nets spanned

the river at West Prestonsburg and one at Van Lear (3/13, p. 1). Rainfall Sunday and Sunday night caused the river to rise another two feet.

On Monday, March 3, dragging operations continued. The current of the river was measured at 18 mph (3/13, p. 8). The sixteenth body was recovered about a mile downstream from the accident site, and four more bodies were found on Tuesday and Wednesday, March 4 and 5, leaving the bodies of seven children unrecovered (3/6, p. 1; p. 3).

Five hundred National Guardsmen were billeted in two county schools with Brig. Gen. J. S. Lindsay in charge. More than 100 boats were involved in searching the river, half from nearby Dewey Lake and half privately owned and operated (3/13, p. 1).

Floyd County School Superintendent V. O. Turner was named Chairman of the Prestonsburg Schoolchildren Recovery Committee. The Committee was organized to work in the same ways as were the National Guardsmen (3/20, p. 1). Joining the recovery operation were over a hundred men from Eastern Tennessee and an unspecified number from Sandusky, Ohio. The Red Cross continued its work, but the number of National Guardsmen dropped from a high of about 500 to 176. Although the Guardsmen were billeted at the Prestonsburg High School gymnasium, the combined high school and elementary school resumed classes on Monday, March 17 (3/20, p. 6).

Floyd County Courthouse personnel joined in the recovery effort on Friday, March 28. Recovery workers searched the river as far as Catlettsburg, some 65 or 70 miles north on the Sandy. The searchers were joined on Saturday, March 29, by 60 men from Morristown and other Tennessee communities. The Guardsmen were

scheduled to leave on Friday, March 28 (3/27, p. 1), but Governor Chandler ordered them not to withdraw from duty (4/3, p. 1).⁴

Mr. Graham Burchett, director of civilian recovery operations of the Prestonsburg Schoolchildren Recovery Committee, appealed for volunteers to man the bridges as night watchmen. The Floyd County Board of Education and the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee (directed by Burl Spurlock) jointly offered a reward of \$1000 for each body recovered in hopes of encouraging more volunteer participation. The Guardsmen on duty, reduced to 91, were further reduced to 34 by the end of March (4/1, p. 1). Possibly as a result of finding two more bodies on April 8 and 9, the number of Guardsmen on duty was increased to 70 (4/10, p. 1). The Coast Guard base in St. Louis, Missouri, sent twenty outboard motors for use, and various outboard motor manufacturers sent ten more. With the number of missing victims reduced to five, Graham Burchett still sought volunteers.

Two more victims were found on April 11 and 16, and the 25th victim's body was recovered from the Sandy on April 23. The \$1000 reward was frequently refused by those who recovered the children's bodies. The 26th victim was found on April 30; and on May 10, 71 days after the accident, the last of the missing children was recovered from the river. The National Guardsmen left Prestonsburg on Tuesday, May 13. FCT reported that "Disaster-ridden Floyd county [sic] now lives with its memories." (5/15, p. 6)

⁴Apparently a few local citizens complained that tax money was being wasted by keeping the Guard in Prestonsburg to help recover children's bodies (May 9, 1980, interview with V. O. Turner, now teaching at Pikeville College). Mr. Turner and others spoke to the Governor and asked that the Guardsmen remain in Prestonsburg. The Governor complied with their request.

From the time of the accident until after the last child's body was recovered, cooperation, useful help in terms of supplies and aid of all sorts, and supportive sentiment by the public at large were the rule.⁵ Financial aid for the expenses of recovering victims' bodies and for their funeral expenses came from all over the United States and, occasionally, beyond.⁶ By May 14, the funds received by the Prestonsburg Schoolchildren Recovery Committee stood at about \$55,000, although that total had been greatly depleted by funeral expenses and reward money (5/15, p. 1). In addition, the Floyd County Bar Association offered advice and legal aid gratis to the families of the victims (3/13, p. 1) and represented them in settling with insurers.

The causes of the accident are unknown. The weather was clear, visibility good, and the pavement dry. John Derossett did not suffer a heart attack as some people suspected (an autopsy was performed on Derossett by Dr. E. N. Thorsness of Pikeville, Kentucky). The road surface was reported to show no skidmarks from brake pressure.⁷ Brake or steering failure was rendered impossible to detect in that the front wheel assembly was pulled off the bus in the process of towing it out of the river.

⁵Mr. Graham Burchett and Mr. James B. Goble, both officers of the Recovery Committee, expressed emphatically the community's appreciation for total individual, county, state, and national cooperation (Interview, June 10, 1979). To quote Mr. Burchett, "All we had to do was ask for it, and we got it."

⁶Two volumes of contributors' letters are in the holdings of the Floyd County Public Library in Prestonsburg.

⁷Later, the father of John Derossett mentioned tire marks in the road in attempting to establish that his son did indeed apply the brakes (3/13, p. 4). The presence of the marks was corroborated by Mr. Burchett and Mr. Goble in the June 10, 1979, interview.

Donald L. Horn, the driver of the wrecker, reported that a truck had left the upper (east) side of the highway and was across the ditchline (3/6, p. 6). Horn pulled behind the truck to see if his help were needed. He said that the wrecker was still on the right lane of the highway, but that he had signaled his stop. The bus hit the wrecker and knocked it some 50 feet further up the highway.

Horn, Scout Executive C. O. Williams, and Bennie Blackburn (a witness who lived at the accident site) ran into the water and tried to save as many lives as possible. "If we had had another minute we'd have got them all out," Horn said. "But they wedged in the emergency door. I don't know how many got out." (3/6, p. 6) Blackburn "...said that the bus moved so slowly across the road after hitting the wrecker that he believed ordinary braking pressure would have stopped it." (3/6, p. 6)

The Kentucky State Police report concluded that bus driver Derossett had three chances to brake the bus to a halt before hitting the water. Blackburn stated that the bus was going too fast and didn't slow down before the impact. Izaac Vanderpool, a student on the bus who was seated directly behind Derossett and who was talking to Derossett shortly before the collision, said that the bus was not moving too fast and that Derossett didn't see the wrecker until it was too late to avoid the collision. Two mechanics had checked the bus two days before the accident and had reported it to be in "good mechanical condition." (3/13, p. 4)⁸

⁸Driver John Derossett's brother, Bryant, denied that the bus had been checked (3/6, p. 6).

The conclusions of the police report are as follows:⁹

- 1. Weather and road conditions were both good.
- 2. The brakes of the school bus were not applied. (No brake lights were seen by a Mr. Hoffman, a witness who had been driving about 1000-1500 feet behind the bus. School children remembered no feeling of brakes being applied before or after the impact.)
- 3. The driver made no effort to control the bus after the collision.
- 4. The wrecker driver gave a proper hand signal while slowing down. (Hoffman saw the signal.)
- 5. The bus swerved left, hit the left rear of a parked car, and went down the embankment.
- 6. The bus driver was talking to Izaac Vanderpool just before the collision.
- 7. There was no oncoming traffic to prohibit the bus from swerving around the wrecker. (3/13, p. 4)

At the inquiry, Mr. Harry Ranier testified that the bus's steering mechanism may have been damaged by the collision. Ranier believed that the bus didn't have brakes at the time of impact. The bus was found in third gear (the bus had four gears forward), and Derossett may have been gearing down upon impact. The bus's right front fender was wrapped around the right front wheel, locking it. A Kentucky State Policeman denied the "three chances to brake" hypothesis (5/22, p. 2).

One witness had reported that the bus was doing 35-40 mph at the time of the collision (5/29, p. 1). However, the bus used in a reenactment of the disaster, with its lighter load, could make only 30 mph between the Knotley Hollow bridge (where

⁹The reader is encouraged to compare these conclusions and those of the next two paragraphs with the events of the disaster remembered by Izaac Vanderpool. The transcript of the May 13, 1980, interview with Mr. Vanderpool appears later in this study.

Derossett picked up his last load of children) and the point where bus #27 left U.S. Route 23.

One may say that there are two memorials to the 27 victims of the disaster. One is the guardrail that was placed at the spot where bus #27 left U.S. Route 23 (2/26/59, p. 1). The other, the more important and fitting, is the Floyd County Kentucky Emergency & Rescue Squad, a non-profit, volunteer organization which grew out of the Prestonsburg Schoolchildren Recovery Committee. The training of its nineteen charter members began on April 27, 1958, by the Greenville, Tennessee, rescue squad. The Floyd County Rescue Squad's first captain, Graham Burchett, and its first secretary-treasurer, James B. Goble (6/5, p. 1), are still active in the organization at this writing. On the squad building in Prestonsburg is a plaque dedicating the squad and its work to the memory of those who died on February 28, 1958. A list of their names and ages follows:

Doris Faye Burchett, 15
James Edison Carey, 9
Glenda May Cisco, 17
Kenneth Forrest Cisco, 14
Paulette Cline, 9
Sandra Faye Cline, 8
Emogene Darby, 17
Linda Darby, 14
John Alex Derossett, 27
Anna Laura Goble, 9

James Edward Goble, 12
John Spencer Goble, 11
Jane Carol Harris, 14
John Harlan Hughes, 13
Margaret Louise Hunt, 15
Bucky Ray Jarrell, 14
Katie Carol Jarrell, 13
Marcella Jervis, 14
Montaine Jervis, 15
Thomas Roosevelt Jervis, 13
Kathryn Justice, 16
Joyce Ann Matney, 14
Rita Cheryl Matney, 8
Nannie Joyce McPeek, 17
James L. Meade, Jr., 9
James Thomas Ousley, 15
Randy Wallen, 17

II. The Ballads of the Disaster

In varying degrees the six recovered ballads are modern day counterparts of what Bill Malone terms event songs.¹ Like the event songs' ancestors, the broadsides, these six ballads are journalistic in tone and are concerned with social commentary. Further, as is often the case with event songs and broadsides, these ballads conclude with a moral or a preachment.

Each of the six ballads is treated individually below in the following manner: introduction and source, tune with the first stanza placed relative to the notes, complete text or texts of the ballad, and explanatory footnotes and further comment. I am indebted to librarian John Forbes and music student Charles Jones for the musical transcriptions of the ballads.

"The Big Sandy Disaster"--V. H. Harp

I received a copy of "The Big Sandy Disaster" in spring 1976 from a former student, Mrs. Phyllis Rose, who remembered hearing a ballad or a song about the disaster many years before. The copy she sent me is a photocopy of the one her mother saved in the family Bible in Jackson, Breathitt County, Kentucky. I assumed for two years that this was "the" ballad of the disaster, and I was quite wrong.

As it became apparent that there were several ballads written about the disaster, I began--with the able help of Mary Griffie Caudill, an informant and friend from Orkney, Floyd County, Kentucky--to make inquiry into the identity and the

¹Bill C. Malone, Southern Music/American Music. New Perspectives on the South, gen. ed. Charles P. Roland (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1979), p. 64.

whereabouts of V. H. Harp, "The Country Preacher." As a last attempt I advertised in the Lexington Herald during the week of May 18, 1980. Mr. Harp and his two daughters responded to the ad, he included his unlisted phone number, and we arranged for an interview (see the introduction to and the transcript of the interview with V. H. Harp later in this study).

Of the six recovered ballads of the disaster, only Harp's may be called a broadside in the strictest sense of the term. Harp, a radio preacher and a street preacher, wrote, copyrighted, printed (eventually in at least two versions), and began to distribute "The Big Sandy Disaster" in March, 1958. Brother Harp distributed a broadside copy of his "country ballad" to anyone requesting it in person or by mail. Harp's incomplete records of his radio-preaching days show the names of 963 listeners who requested a printed copy of the ballad, so his estimate of having distributed more than a thousand copies (see interview) is accurate. Though Harp did not charge for copies of "The Big Sandy Disaster," written requests for the broadside were often accompanied by donations varying from a nickel to, rarely, a dollar.

The first version of the ballad below is the version copyrighted by Harp on March 31, 1958. The second version, under the same copyright but with some minor changes and a different sixth stanza, was lithographed between four and six months after the first version.

Brother Harp recorded both versions onto tape--the first version (without the sixth stanza) during our interview and

the second a few days later. During the interview Brother Harp read from my copy of version one as he sang. I can only assume that he also read from copy during his second recording and that the copy was that of version two.¹ Harp mailed me the tape of his second recording, and under separate cover he mailed an original of version two, the lithographed edition.

The Big Sandy Disaster

way up in Floyd County where the Big Sandy
 flows, — a disaster has hap-pen-ed. Why, only God knows.
 But here is the story told by those who did see — that
 aw-ful dis-as-ter on high-way twenty + three.

¹Because Brother Harp read from the text during his first recording and most probably did so during his second, I am considering the printed copies as the texts of the ballad rather than what he actually sang. During the actual singing of each version by Harp, there is some variation from his text (see the transcript of version one in the Harp interview to compare to the text of version one included below). I believe the differences in the printed and the sung versions are a result of his misreading, his possible self-consciousness, and/or his half-remembering bits and pieces of both versions.

The Big Sandy Disaster (Version One)²

- [1] Way up in Floyd County, where the Big Sandy flows
A disaster has happened, Why? Only God knows
Here is the story told by those who did see
That awful disaster on highway twenty three
- [2] It was on Friday February twenty eight
The news was flashed quickly all over the state,
A school bus was missing somewhere long the way³
And the Big Sandy river had swallowed its prey
- [3] A Floyd County school bus, had its load for the day
And was heading for Prestonsburg, three miles away
Everyone seemed so happy as the big bus did roll
Then striking a wrecker, it went out of control
- [4] Over an embankment the school bus did vault
At the bank of Big Sandy it came to a halt⁴
When the back door came open, some children took flight⁵
But twenty six and the driver then sank out of sight

²For details of the ballad's writing, its popularity, and responses to the ballad, see the transcript of the interview with V. H. Harp later in this study.

³There was never a report of a bus "...missing somewhere long the way." To the best of my knowledge the first report of the accident came in a phone call made by a Mr. Hoffman, an insurance representative who had been driving 1000-1500 feet behind the bus at the time of the collision. Hoffman testified that he had run down the bank behind Horn and Blackburn and that he had then returned to the highway to phone for help.

⁴There seems to be some disagreement about what happened to the bus after its descent. The bus certainly did not come to a halt. According to some witnesses, the bus slowed down upon reaching the edge of the Sandy in that the slope of the embankment was less steep near the water's edge. Others, who reached the scene shortly after the accident, said that the embankment didn't flatten out at all by the bank. Ike Vanderpool, the student seated directly behind the driver, does not remember the bus's slowing down before going into the water. Vanderpool remembers the bus slowing only upon its hitting the water, after which the bus continued into the water at a slow but regular rate.

⁵The door was opened by wrecker-driver Donald L. Horn's pulling on it and a youngster's kicking at it from inside the bus. The action seems to verify that the bus must have slowed down considerably as it went into the water in that Horn had to run across U.S. 23 and down the embankment to get to the bus.

- [5] There was weeping and praying, others seemed in a daze
 After three days of searching, the big bus they did raise
 Then the dreadful task was started, by these gallant men
 There was quietness around as the last roll call began
- [6] All bodies were claimed, still others did weep
 For somewhere in Big Sandy nine children did sleep
 Two were found later, as they came adrift⁶
 The search must go on in those waters so swift
- (Chorus)⁷
- [7] Oh Dear God bless those people, with hearts brave but sad
 The Big Sandy river took all that they had
 They can still hear their footsteps on paths they once trod
 They are absent from school, but they are present with God.

Words and Music by V. H. Harp
 "The Country Preacher"

The Big Sandy Disaster (Version Two)⁸

1
 Way up in Floyd County
 Where the Big Sandy Flows
 A Disaster has Happened.

⁶The bodies of the nineteenth and twentieth victims were found on April 4 and April 5. That seven victims were still missing places the writing of the ballad after March 5 but, considering the March 31 copyright date, before (probably considerably before) the end of March.

⁷In recording this version and the second version on tape, Harp did not sing the last stanza as a chorus, i.e., between other stanzas. It seems that Harp may have been under the influence of two different traditions--that of having a chorus and that of having a final stanza containing a moral or a preachment. The latter tradition seems to have won out.

⁸This version of the ballad is the one Harp remembers having printed four to six months after the first version. That the first version was copyrighted on March 31 places the printing of version two between July 31 and September 30, 1958. The logo on the cover and the cover of version two itself were designed by Harp (see facsimile below). His inclusion of the WLAP call letters was simply to advertise his radio ministry. Harp himself paid all the printing and mailing expenses of both versions.

Why only God Knows
 But here is the Story
 Told by Those Who Did See
 That Awful Disaster
 On Highway Twenty Three

2

It Happened on Friday
 February Twenty Eight
 The News was Flashed Quickly
 All over the State
 A School Bus was Missing
 Somewhere 'long the Way
 And The Big Sandy River
 Had Swallowed its Prey

3

A Floyd County School Bus
 Had its Load For the Day
 And Was Heading for Prestonsburg
 Just Three Miles Away
 Everyone Seemed Happy
 As the Big Bus did Roll
 Then Striking a Wrecker
 It went out of Control

4

Then Over an Embankment
 The School Bus did Vault
 At the Bank of Big Sandy
 It Came to a Halt
 In this Brief Moment⁹
 Some Children took Flight
 But Twenty Six and the Driver
 Then Sank out of Sight

5

There was Weeping and Praying
 Others seemed in a Daze
 After Three Days of Searching
 The big Bus was then Raised
 Then the Dreadful Task was Started
 By These Brave and Gallant Men
 There was Quietness all Around
 As the Last Roll Call Began

⁹Version one reads "When the back door came open...." While speaking to Brother Harp on the phone in July, 1980, I inquired about various changes in the second version of the ballad and who had made them. Harp said that he had made them all himself but that he could not remember why he had made them. The changes consist of single words added, changed, or omitted; one rewritten line; and one whole stanza rewritten (stanza 6).

6¹⁰

Oh Why did it Happen
 We can Still Hear them Say
 But the Master He giveth
 and He Taketh Away.
 The Searching Now has Ended
 That Lasted So Long
 The Big Sandy Disaster
 In our Hearts Will Live on

7

Oh Dear God Bless these People
 With Hearts Brave but Sad
 The Big Sandy River
 Took All that They Had
 They Will Long Hear their Footsteps
 On the Paths they once Trod
 They are Absent from School
 But They are Present with God.

Words and Music by

"The Little Country Preacher"¹¹

In "The Big Sandy Disaster" Brother Harp has most of his facts right. During the interview Harp stated that he got his information from news coming in over the wire at radio station WLAP and from reading the newspapers--hence his high degree of accuracy.

Harp's ballad is of more than common merit as an expression by a member of the folk. He is no unpracticed writer of ballads; Harp has written many ballads and hymns over a period spanning at least thirty years. His sense of dramatic irony (stanza 3--

¹⁰The date of this second version (between July 31 and September 30, 1958) is the key to the whole stanza's being rewritten. Whereas version one was written when seven victims were still missing, the second version was written after May 10, 1958, when the body of the last victim was found.

¹¹In the same phone call mentioned in footnote 9 above, I asked Harp why he didn't put his name on version two. He said that since people would recognize him more quickly by his sobriquet than by his surname, he felt it unnecessary to add his name.

"Everyone seemed happy as the big bus did roll") is effective in its understatement as is his addition of the present verb tense in stanza 7 of version one and stanzas 6 and 7 of version two. Stanza 7, the preachment, is powerful and emotion-laden, yet it avoids sticky sentimentality and bathos. Although the ballad has its share of cliches and forced metrics and rhyme, it does not overindulge in tearful commentary even in version two with its preachment extended to both stanzas 6 and 7. The sixth stanza of version one maintains the stark tone of the first five stanzas and, for that reason, I believe it to be the superior version.

Although the ballad is clearly an expression by a member of the folk, it is not at this time a folk ballad. To my knowledge it is not currently sung, nor was it ever sung widely. I have found no variant of "The Big Sandy Disaster" other than the variant consciously written by Brother Harp himself. In looking at a copy of version one of the ballad, Cratis Williams summarized the case nicely when he observed that although it is not now a folk ballad, one day someone may happen upon it, sing it, and introduce it to others. If and when it enters the oral tradition, it may well become a folk ballad.

The Big Sandy Disaster

Way up in Floyd County, where the Big Sandy flows
 A disaster has happened, why? Only God knows
 Here is the story told by those who did see
 That awful disaster on highway twenty three

It was on Friday February twenty eight
 The news was flashed quickly all over the state
 A school bus was missing somewhere long the way
 And the Big Sandy river had swallowed its prey

A Floyd County school bus, had its load for the day
 And was heading for Prestonsburg, three miles away
 Everyone seemed so happy as the big bus did roll
 Then striking a wrecker, it went out of control

Over an embankment the school bus did vault
 At the bank of Big Sandy it came to a halt
 When the back door came open, some children took flight
 But twenty six and the driver then sank out of sight

There was weeping and praying, others seemed in a daze
 After three days of searching, the big bus they did raise
 Then the dreadful task was started, by these gallant men
 There was quietness around as the last roll call began

All bodies were claimed, still others did weep
 For somewhere in Big Sandy nine children did sleep
 Two were found later, as they came adrift
 The search must go on in those waters so swift

(Chorus)
 Oh Dear God bless those people, with hearts brave but sad
 The Big Sandy river took all that they had
 They can still hear their footsteps on paths they once trod
 They are absent from school, but they are present with God.

Words and Music by V. H. Harp
 "The Country Preacher"

THE BIG SANDY DISASTER

TUNE-IN

**W L A P
RADIO**

**7:15 A. M.
SUNDAYS**

A SONG OF

KENTUCKY'S

WORST

SCHOOL BUS

TRAGEDY

The Big Sandy Disaster

1

Way up in Floyd County
Where the Big Sandy Flows
A Disaster has Happened
Why only God Knows
So here is the Story
Told by Those Who Did See
That Awful Disaster
On Highway Twenty Three

2

It Happened on Friday
February Twenty Eight
The News was Flashed Quickly
All Over the State
A School Bus was Missing
Somewhere 'long the Way
And The Big Sandy River
Had Swallowed its Prey

3

A Floyd County School Bus
Had its Load For the Day
And Was Heading for Prestonburg
Just Three Miles Away
Everyone Seemed Happy
As the Big Bus did Roll
Then Striking a Wrecker
It went out of Control

4

Then Over an Embankment
The School Bus did Vault
At the Bank of Big Sandy
It Came to a Halt
In this Brief Moment
Some Children took Flight
But Twenty Six and the Driver
Then Sank out of Sight

5

There was Weeping and Praying
Others seemed in a Daze
After Three Days of Searching
The big Bus was then Raised
Then the Dreadful Task was Started
By These Brave and Gallant Men
There was Quietness all Around
As the Last Roll Call Began

6

Oh Why did it Happen
We can Still Hear them Say
But the Master He giveth
and He Taketh Away.
The Searching Now has Ended
That Lasted So Long
The Big Sandy Disaster
In our Hearts Will Live on

7

Oh Dear God Bless these People
With Hearts Brave but Sad
The Big Sandy River
Took All that They Had
They Will Long Hear their Footsteps
On the Paths they once Trod
They are Absent from School
But They are Present with God.

Words and Music by

"The Little Country Preacher"

"The Wreck of the Floyd County School Bus"

Folklore student Eddie Baldrige gave me his grandmother's copy of "The Wreck of the Floyd County School Bus" in late spring of 1979. Baldrige's grandmother, Mrs. Zallia Baldrige of Clearfield, Kentucky, told me that she had been given her type-written copy at work by "a stranger" in 1958, when Mrs. Baldrige was employed as a laundress in a dry-cleaning/laundry establishment in Morehead, Kentucky. She knew nothing more about the ballad, nor did Mrs. Baldrige know "Little Cathy Fiskus [sic]," the tune to which this disaster ballad is to be sung. (At the time I had never heard of Jimmy Osborne's 1949 country song.) Mrs. Baldrige suggested that I might learn more about the ballad from Mr. Homer Gregory, the owner of the lumber company on whose stationery Mrs. Baldrige's copy of the ballad had been typed (see facsimile at the end of the discussion of this ballad).

Mr. Gregory had no knowledge of the bus disaster ballad. He and Mrs. Gregory telephoned relatives and former employees of the lumber yard to see if any of them knew of it. They did not. Mr. Gregory seemed to remember "Little Cathy Fiskus" as a song which had as its subject the death of a young girl who had fallen into a well. He estimated that he had not heard the song in over twenty years.

I found the story of Kathy Fiscus through the New York Times Index for 1949, and I later read a reference to the death of Jimmy Osborn, the composer of "The Death of Little Kathy

Fiscus."¹ I was fortunate in finding a phonograph recording of the song through a television advertisement, and I had the tune copied from this recording (see transcript below).² I have shown a copy of this ballad to all individuals I have interviewed; no one has recognized it. At this writing the ballad remains anonymous.

The Wreck of the Floyd County School Bus³

It was on Fri-day morning a-bout ten af-ter eight When the
 an-gel o-f God did o-pen the gate— There were
 twen-ty six chil-dren who died there that day— Three
 miles from Pres-tonsburg cit-y they say—

¹Jimmy Osborne is generally given credit for writing both the words and the music to "The Death of Little Kathy Fiscus" (see Bill C. Malone, Country Music, U.S.A. Publications of the American Folklore Society, Memoir Series, Vol. 54, gen. ed. John Greenway (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 222, footnote). However, Dorothy Horstman (Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), p. 73) gives credit to Jimmy Osborne and G. Nigh.

²Jimmy Osborne, "Death of Little Kathy Fiscus [sic]," Vol. I, side B, cut 2, 40 Country Hits of the '40s (Nashville: Gusto Special Products, 1978), GTV 108.

³In doing the underlay of the lyrics of the tune copied out by Forbes and Jones, in four instances I had to divide a quarter note into two eighth notes to accommodate the number of syllables to be sung to one musical beat. At the points where I divided the quarter notes, I have marked the transcript Q above the staff.

THE WRECK OF THE FLOYD COUNTY SCHOOL BUS

- [1] It was on Friday morning about ten after eight,
When the Angel of God did open the gate,
There were 26 children who died there that day⁴
Three miles from Prestonsburg city they say.
- [2] The driver picked up the children so gay
Then stepped on the starter as he drove away,
Then on down the road its sad but its true
The wrecker it then came into view.
- [3] The water was cold, muddy, and deep
Then into the river the school bus did creep,
Then into the arms of Jesus above
Went those darling children of whom that we love.
- [4] Their sweet little faces we will see here no more.
Until we meet them on God's golden shore,
I'm going to meet them in glory some day
Forever to live, forever to stay.⁵
- [5] There are 26 seats that are empty today
In that old school house some where down the way
There are 2 little bodies that has not been found⁶
That may be sleeping down under the ground.
- [6] Our God up in Heaven he sees them today,
He knows the very spot that they lay
He is watching over them both day and night⁷
Keeping them safe from harm and from fright.

⁴It is interesting that driver John Derossett is never mentioned in this ballad as having been one of those who died in the disaster.

⁵The preachment, which appears in stanza 4 and in the last three stanzas, is interesting in that it moves from the first person (stanza 4), into the third person (stanza 6), back into the first person (stanza 7), then into the second person (stanza 8). Often such shifting constitutes a weakness, but in this instance the shift seems to bespeak or to echo an implied universal involvement in the disaster.

⁶That the 25th victim was recovered on April 23rd and the 26th on April 30th most probably places the writing of this ballad between these two dates. If this dating is accurate, this ballad is the latest-written of the five ballads included in this study.

⁷In Mrs. Baldrige's copy of the ballad, this line originally read "In a land that is happy, in a land that is sweet" and

[7] So all we can do is to watch and to pray
 Until he calls us up there some day,
 Where we can join children so neat
 In a land that is happy, in a land that is sweet

[8] Dear Fathers and Mothers trust Jesus today
 He will surely, surely show you the way
 That leads to that land where all can be blessed,
 In a Heaven of Glory in a Heaven of rest.

Please sing in the tune of "Little Cathy Fiskus [sic]."

Certainly this ballad is a product of a member of the folk. Although the writer is not so practiced at balladry as is V. H. Harp ("The Big Sandy Disaster") and although the forced metrics (e.g., "...of whom that we love," stanza 3, line 4) and rhyme (e.g., "Then into the river the school bus did creep," stanza 3, line 2; and "Where we can join children so neat," stanza 7, line 3), the poet is not without his or her merit. An effective rhetorical device through which the poet gains power is the parallelism in the last line of stanza 4 ("Forever to live, forever to stay"), stanza 7 ("In a land that is happy, in a land that is sweet"), and stanza 8 ("In a Heaven of Glory in a Heaven of rest") as well as less apparent parallelisms within other lines and from one line to the next. Stanza 6 affords imagery of simple warmth: "He is watching over them both day and night / Keeping them safe from harm and from fright."

is crossed out (see facsimile below). The line correctly occurs as the last line in the next stanza. Upon this fact I base my assumption that Mrs. Baldrige's copy is not the original. Whoever typed the copy that came to Mrs. Baldrige most probably glanced at the last line of the seventh stanza while typing and mistakenly typed it as the last line of stanza 6, noticed the error, crossed it out, and typed the correct last line of stanza 6. There is, of course, no way of determining the nature of the original from which the typed copy was made. It may have been a manuscript of which no other copies exist.

As is the case with Harp's "The Big Sandy Disaster," "The Wreck of the Floyd County School Bus" is not a folk ballad, although it is a ballad of the folk. At this time I cannot say how widely the ballad was circulated, nor can I say with any surety that the ballad was sung by anyone but its anonymous composer.

THE WRECK OF THE FLOYD COUNTY SCHOOL BUS

It was on Friday morning about ten after eight,
 When the Angel of God did open the gate,
 There were 26 children who died there that day
 Three miles from Prestonsburg city they say.

The driver picked up the children so gay
 Then stepped on the starter as he drove away,
 Then on down the road its sad but its true
 The wrecker it then came into view.

The water was cold, muddy, and deep
 Then into the river the school bus did creep,
 Then into the arms of Jesus above
 Went those darling children of whom that we love.

Their sweet little faces we will see here no more
 Until we meet them on God's golden shore,
 I'm going to meet them in glory some day
 Forever to live, forever to stay.

There are 26 seats that are empty today
 In that oldschool house some where down the way,
 There are 2 little bodies that hasnot been found
 That may be sleeping down under the ground.

Our God up in Heaven he sees them today,
 He knows the very spot that they lay
 He is watching over them both day and night,
~~He is watching over them both day and night,~~
 Keeping them safe from harm and from fright.

So all we can do is to watch and to pray
 Until he calls us up there some day,
 Where we can join children so neat
 In a land that is happy, in a land that is sweet

Dear Fathers and Mothers trust Jesus today
 He will surely, surely show you the way
 That leads to that land where all can be blessed,
 In a Heaven of Glory in a Heaven of rest.

Please sing in the tune of "Little Cathy Fiskus."

[Facsimile of Mrs. Zallia Baldrige's Typewritten Copy]



"No School Bus in Heaven"--Jack Adkins and Buddy Dee

During the summer of 1977, a folklore student loaned me a copy of the Stanley Brothers' recording of Jack Adkins and Buddy Dee's country ballad "No School Bus in Heaven." The Mercury Records 45 rpm recording (YWL6342) belonged to her mother-in-law, who lived in West Virginia. From the record I made the tape which is the source of both the tune and the words below.

In August of 1978 I wrote to Phonogram, Inc., the parent company of Mercury Records. Mr. Harry S. Losk, Phonogram's vice president for national sales, replied that much of the information about tune and lyrics authorship, number of records cut, number of records sold, and so on, was not readily available. However, Losk did include the label copy for "No School Bus in Heaven," and the copy is dated March 31, 1958, with the statement that the record was to be released for sale on April 30, 1958. The latter date appears on the record also. Since the record had been cut before the label copy was distributed, the song was probably written before mid-March, 1958. I wrote to Phonogram, Inc., again in April of 1980 and offered to pay for a research assistant's time in going into the "inactive files." However, as of this writing, I have had no reply.

No School Bus in Heaven

On route twenty three - down 4 East-grn - Ken-tucky -

a school-bus wrecked there - in the county - of
 Floyd. - It left many Parents a-weep-in' - and
 mourn-in' - It took a-way the lives of - their
 little girls and boys -

No School Bus in Heaven

- [1] On Route Twenty-three down in Eastern Kentucky
 A school bus wrecked there in the County of Floyd
 It left many parents a-weepin' and mournin'
 It took away the lives of their little girls and boys

(Chorus)

- [2] These little school children have gone on to glory
 No lessons to study, no worries or cares
 They're now rejoicin' an' walkin' with Jesus
 They won't have to ride on a school bus up there

- [3] God please watch over these heart-broken families
 Give them the courage to go on alone
 Show them the right way that leads up to Heaven
 Where once more the family will all be at home

(Chorus)

Loyal Jones of Berea College put me in touch with Ralph Stanley. When I spoke to Stanley in August of 1980, he had

memory of the song, and he recalled that "Hobo" Jack Adkins had written it. Stanley said that he had sung "No School Bus in Heaven" many times during personal appearances and that the response to the song had been "good." He had no memory of how well the recording sold, nor did he recall any other releases or recordings of the song.¹ I asked Stanley what he considered the song to be--that is, did he feel that it is a religious song or a disaster ballad--and he replied that he considered it a "heart song" or a sentimental ballad.

Stanley seemed to remember that he, his brother Carter, and the Clinch Mountain Boys did not record the exact same thing that Adkins had written. Unfortunately, neither Stanley nor anyone else with whom I have been in contact knows the whereabouts of Jack Adkins, nor has anyone heard of Buddy Dee. However, I was fortunate in coming across a reference to Adkins' "Kentucky School Bus" in the Kentucky Folklore Record,² and I shall present that ballad next.

Although the first stanza of "No School Bus in Heaven" begins in the tradition of the earlier event songs and the other ballads in this study, the narrative is not developed. Stanza 2, the chorus, is a preachment, as is stanza 3. The Stanley Brothers' effort is not a folk ballad or a folk song. Although I have

¹A discography in the Kentucky Folklore Record 16:1 (Jan.-March, 1970) lists a release of "No School Bus in Heaven" recorded by The Mountain Four in their album Last Mile of the Way (Salem LP 1062, 12" 33 rpm). As of this writing I have been unable to find a copy.

²"Discography," Kentucky Folklore Record 8:1 (Jan.-March, 1962), p. 27.

spoken to people who have heard it sung in person, I have found no evidence that it was sung widely. Certainly it is not sung now.

"Kentucky School Bus"--"Hobo" Jack Adkins

After reading the reference to Adkins' "Kentucky School Bus" in KFR, I called Mr. Bob Pinson, Director of Acquisitions at the Country Music Foundation Library in Nashville. He and Mr. Danny Hatcher, the Foundation's curator, sent me a tape of Adkins' ballad (Starday 363, 7" 45 rpm) early in September, 1980; and from that tape I made the transcription of the words and music below.

Kentucky School Bus.

On Route twenty three - in Eastern Ken-tuc-ky - A school bus had
wrecked in the county of Floyd - It left several Par-ents
a weep-in' and mourn-ning - It took the sweet lives - of
their girls and boys - (Chorus) Lit-tle school chil-dren that went on to
heaven - They'll have no les-sons - up there to learn - They will be



Kentucky School Bus

(Chorus)

Little school children that went on to heaven
 They'll have no lessons up there to learn
 They will be singing and shouting in glory
 They won't have to ride no school busses there

On Route 23 in Eastern Kentucky
 A school bus had wrecked in the county of Floyd
 It left several parents a-weepin' and mourning
 It took the sweet lives of their girls and boys

God, please look over these heartbroken families
 Give them the courage to go on alone
 Show them the way that leads up to heaven
 Where once more their families will all be at home

(Chorus)

Although I have no date for the release of Adkins' ballad on Starday 363, I assume it must have been prior to the April 30, 1958, release of the Adkins-Dee "No School Bus in Heaven." It is not likely that Mercury Records would have paid Adkins for the rights to his ballad, have hired Buddy Dee to revise the lyrics and write a new melody, have given Adkins label-credit (along with Dee) as the composer, and then have allowed Adkins to record his original on a rival label. More than likely Mercury gambled that their widely-known label and the relative fame of the Stanley

Brothers would lead to a hot sales item, given the media coverage of the school bus disaster. In short, my guess is that Mercury hoped that they had another "The Death of Little Kathy Fiscus" on their hands. I have no idea of what royalty arrangement Mercury had with Adkins. Interestingly, I can find no copyright for either the Adkins or the Adkins-Dee ballad in the 1958 and the 1959 editions of the Library of Congress's Catalog of Copyright Entries: Music.

It is not totally unfair to say that "No School Bus in Heaven" is just a slicked-up version of "Kentucky School Bus." The Stanley Brothers' version is clearly in the bluegrass tradition and is metrically regular. Adkins' version, on the other hand, is closer to being a genuine country ballad with a less-catchy instrumentation, a less memorable tune, and an irregularity of meter more common in the oral tradition than in the more literary pop or pop-country-western-bluegrass traditions. Mercury obviously paid more attention to fine details than did Starday in this instance: the instruments playing background for Adkins on Starday 363 are not even perfectly in tune with one another.

Although it is inherently unfair to compare merits and failings of various ballads and performances when the writer's chief function is simply to report and comment on the ballads' existence, it is difficult not to observe that some recordings and performances are closer to a folk source than are others. Certainly the Adkins recording on Starday represents something closer to a product of the folk than does the Stanley Brothers'

recording for Mercury. This is not to say that the Stanley Brothers do not play traditional music or sing traditional ballads-- they often do. But in this instance the Stanley Brothers seem to have borrowed a ballad from one tradition and to have dressed it handsomely in their own but different traditional garb--the garb of bluegrass.

I do not know to what degree Hobo Jack Adkins is actually a representative of the folk or is himself a folk poet. My own feeling is that "Kentucky School Bus" may well be a ballad of the folk, but it is obviously not a folk ballad. I have not come into contact with anyone who remembers hearing the record played, much less the ballad actually sung. Adkins' ballad may be just one more instance of a ballad written with echoes of the older event song and just one more that never caught the fancy or the ear of a larger folk.

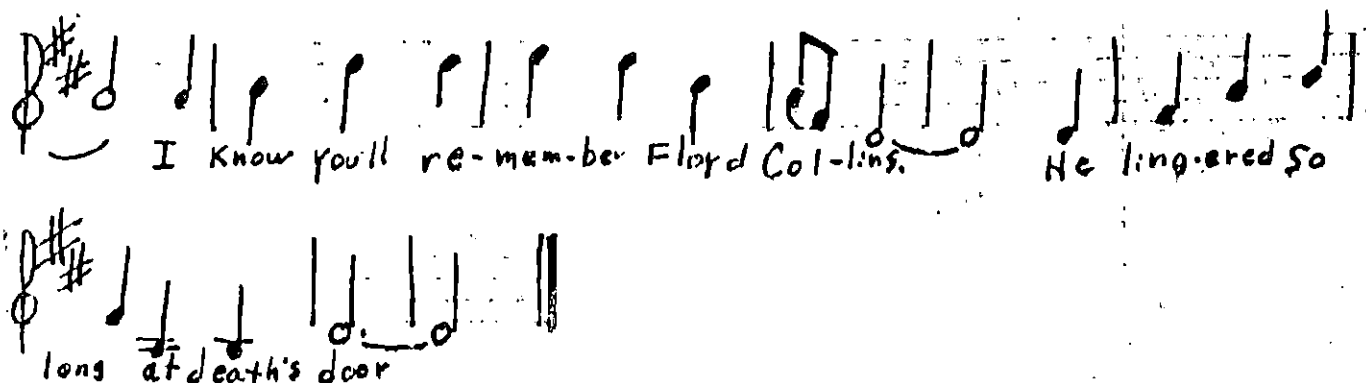
"Tragedy of School Bus 27 (of Floyd Co., Ky.)"--W. C. Burchett

In spring, 1978, another folklore student loaned me her mother's copy of W. C. Burchett's "Tragedy of School Bus 27 (of Floyd Co., Ky.)."¹ Although the condition of the record was poor, I made from the copy the tape from which the words and music below were transcribed. During the summer of 1978, folklore student Judy Martt gave me a tape of a second copy of the record, but again the quality was poor. Dr. Michael Biel, a professor of radio and television production at Morehead State University and a man with an encyclopedic knowledge of recording and broadcasting history, made the acquaintance of an avid collector of country music recordings, Mrs. Virginia Jones of Huntington, West Virginia. Mrs. Jones mentioned to him that she had recordings of many ballads concerned with disasters, including two about the 1958 bus disaster: "The Yellow Tomb" (to be discussed next) and Burchett's "Tragedy of School Bus 27...." Biel and I visited Mrs. Jones in Huntington in June, 1980, and she gave me one of her two copies of the latter-- a record in excellent condition from which I was able to gain a correct reading of all the words.

Tragedy of School Bus 27 (of Floyd Co., Ky.)

Way down in old Ken-tuck-y, a place we've heard of be- fore.

¹W. C. Burchett, "Tragedy of School Bus 27 (of Floyd Co., Ky.), vocal by Ralph Bowman, EX400A, matrix no. CP-1450 (Cincinnati: Excellent Records, 1958).



Tragedy of School Bus 27 (of Floyd Co., Ky.)

- [1] Way down in old Kentucky
 A place we've heard of before
 I know you'll remember Floyd Collins²
 He lingered so long at death's door
- [2] And now another tragedy
 Has struck our hearts so near
 And as odd as it may be
 Twenty-seven was used by three³
- [3] A school bus loaded with children
 Came around a curve
 A truck loomed out before them
 The bus so quickly swerved
- [4] The news soon spread in Floyd County
 The whole world will soon know
 Our school bus plunged in the river
 In water many feet below

²Various accounts of the 1925 Floyd Collins disaster may be read in the print media of the day. For an interesting note concerning the composition of and the recording of the ballad "The Death of Floyd Collins," see Bill C. Malone, Country Music U.S.A., pp. 61-2.

³This line refers to the coincidence of the number 27's "being used" three times relative to the disaster: The bus's number was 27, driver John Derossett's age was 27, and there were 27 victims. This coincidence has entered the folk memory. On at least four occasions I have been informed by students from Floyd County and environs of the coincidence, and as often as not I have been told that the accident took place on February 27, not February 28. The only written reference I have come across referring to the coincidence is in an article written for a student newspaper, the Mayogram (March, 1958, p. 12). For further comment on the coincidence, see the section later in this study entitled Elements of Folklore and the School Bus Disaster.

- [5] Folks lined the banks of the river
They came from miles around
When the school bus broke the surface
Twenty-seven children had drowned⁴
- [6] "All we have in this world is gone"
A grief-stricken mother cried
"Of tragedy we've had our share
But never to the heart so near."⁵
- [7] Our hearts cry out to you friendly folks
In a small way we know how you feel
We would like to deny this story
But God knows it's real
- [8] The tragedy of Bus Twenty-Seven
Will be remembered throughout the years
But to the folks of Floyd County
This chapter is written in tears
- [9] "Suffer all the children
To come unto me..."
From this mortal, sinful world
God has set them free

In attempting to uncover information about the defunct Excellent Records Studio, the whereabouts of their files, and the whereabouts of W. C. Burchett and Ralph Bowman, I wrote to Shad O'Shea, the president of Counterpart Creative Studios in Cincinnati, Ohio. Although Mr. O'Shea has been active in the recording business in and around Cincinnati over the past 25 years, he wrote to me in April, 1980, that the song title was familiar to him, but that neither he nor his contacts "...had any knowledge of Excellent Records, the artist, or the writer,"

Mrs. Anna Sue Stumbo (see interview later in this study)

⁴Only 26 of the victims were children; the 27th victim was driver John Derossett.

⁵Of the six ballads dealing with the disaster, only Burchett's introduces drama through dialogue.

mentioned that she had helped the Floyd County Library in Prestonsburg gather together letters of condolence sent to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee in 1958. In examining the two volumes of letters in August, 1980, I found several letters pertaining to the W. C. Burchett ballad.⁶ In an undated letter, Estel Lee, the president of Excellent Records, informed the Committee that W. C. Burchett of Ashland, Kentucky, writer of "Tragedy of School Bus 27...", intended to give half his royalties from the recording to the Committee to use "...in any way that it might help the people who lost their children."⁷ Lee also requested the name of the person to whom to send the money when it became available. There are no further letters from Excellent Records, nor is there a letter from Burchett in the Floyd County Library's collection.⁸

Lou Epstein of the Jimmy Skinner Music Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, wrote a letter dated March 29, 1958, to Burl Spurlock, President of the First National Bank in Prestonsburg and a coordinator of the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, informing him that the Music Center was contributing 20¢ to the Committee for each copy of Burchett's ballad they sold. Epstein also enclosed a check for \$14.00 (presumably the contribution from the sale of 70 copies of the ballad) and a copy of a release that Jimmy Skinner

⁶Collection of unpublished letters to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, vol. 2, Floyd County Public Library, Prestonsburg, Kentucky.

⁷Estel Lee, Letter to Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, n.d., ibid.

⁸The 1979 Ashland, Kentucky, telephone directory lists three Burchetts whose first initial is W. None of these Burchetts have any knowledge of W. C. Burchett.

Music Center had sent to an unspecified number of disc jockeys in three states: Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia.⁹ The undated release reads as follows:

Dear Country Music D.J.:

On February 28, 1958, 27 children perished in a school bus accident in Prestonsburg, Kentucky. Enclosed find a record which has caused considerable interest telling the true story of the tragedy THE TRAGEDY OF SCHOOL BUS 27.

The JIMMY SKINNER MUSIC CENTER will donate 20% of the money received on this record to a fund set up for the families of these children, The Disaster Committee (Mr. Burl Spurlock, President of the First National Bank, Prestonsburg, Ky., is the chairman.)

If you would like to help play the record on the air, tell the people to mail you \$1.00 for a 45rpm copy of the record. Deduct 20¢ for your trouble and mail the remaining 80¢ to the Jimmy Skinner Music Center. We will donate the 20¢ on each record to the fund in your station's name. Please let us know if you will help in this worthy cause.¹⁰

Epstein later wrote Spurlock that three radio stations and another record store were cooperating, and he enclosed a check representing contributions from the sales of an additional 150 copies of "Tragedy of School Bus 27...."¹¹ With the letter

⁹That the date of the letter is March 29 and that the record had been cut, sold, and distributed before March 29 points to the recording's having been made no later than around mid-March and to Burchett's having written the ballad most probably during the first week of March. According to the Catalog of Copyright Entries: Music, January-June, 1958 (Washington: Copyright Office & the Library of Congress, 1959, p. 558), a W. E. Burchett was granted a copyright for "Tragedy of School Bus 27" on March 20, 1958.

¹⁰Lou Epstein, Letter to Burl Spurlock, Unpublished collection of letters to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, letter dated 29 March, 1958, vol. 2 of collection, Floyd County Public Library, Prestonsburg, Kentucky.

¹¹Lou Epstein, Letter to Burl Spurlock, 15 April, 1958, ibid.

Epstein also enclosed a copy of a flyer distributed by the Jimmy Skinner Music Center to potential record buyers. The flyer includes notices of several records, Burchett's ballad included, and a description of the latter as follows:

A TRUE STORY IN SONG On Feb. 28 27 children drowned in a bus accident in Prestonsbury Ky. This is the story of the accident.... THE JIMMIE SKINNER MUSIC CENTER WILL DONATE 20% OF THE MONEY RECEIVED ON THIS RECORD TO A FUND SET UP FOR THE PARENTS OF THE VICTIMS (Disaster Committee Prestonsburg Ky.)¹²

How many copies of the record were eventually sold and how much more money came in to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee is difficult to determine in that the Floyd County Library volumes contain no more letters from either Epstein or the Center.

The Jimmy Skinner Music Center still operates in Cincinnati, although no one now employed by the Center was employed there in 1958. During a phone call in August, 1980, Mr. Lou Ukelson of the Center told me that in the 1950's some employees of the Center opened the Excellent Records Studio next door to the Center when it was on 5th Street in Cincinnati. Ukelson had no knowledge of the business relationship with or the arrangement between the Center and Excellent Records, and he told me that of those of whom he knew that were connected with either company in 1958, all are dead except one, Estel Lee. Ukelson could find no listing in his phone directories for Estel Lee or for Estel Lee Scarborough (Lee's full name), nor could he suggest a way for me to find him.

¹²Ibid.

Ukelson had no knowledge of either W. C. Burchett or Ralph Bowman, the recording artist.

The metrics of "Tragedy of School Bus 27...", its forced rhyme, the peculiarities of phrasing related to these (Twenty-seven was used by three..., stanza 2, line 4), and its abundant use of clichés all point to the ballad's being a product of a relatively unpracticed folk poet. However, the product is not a folk ballad in that, so far as I can tell, it did not enter nor has it entered the oral tradition.

Burchett's narrative lacks the power and the genuine feeling of Harp's "The Big Sandy Disaster" and of the anonymous "The Wreck of the Floyd County School Bus" and, compared to these two, seems hastily written. The use of the first person pronoun (generally in the plural) is confusing in showing the poet's relationship to the event. Only in stanza 4 does the pronoun imply Burchett's being part of the group most directly involved in the disaster--i.e., Floyd Countians. The our, we, and you of stanza 7 clearly implies author identification with a group who are not Floyd Countians, and the our of stanza 2 may refer to non-Kentuckians, Kentuckians who are not Floyd Countians, Floyd Countians only, or a combination of the first two. The result of the ambiguity is confusion--an interesting contrast in light of the results of the shifting of person in "The Wreck of the Floyd County Schoolbus." In addition to these problems, the ballad's preachment (stanza 9) arrives unexpectedly. It does not grow out of the earlier stanzas nor does it seem to be

an extension of the matter of those earlier stanzas, as were the preachments of the ballads so far considered in this study.

Perhaps the above observations may best be summarized thus: the tone of "Tragedy of School Bus 27..." does not lead to or lend to the elevation of spirit as "The Big Sandy Disaster" and "The Wreck of the Floyd County School Bus" do. Burchett's narrative and preachment just do not set off a sympathetic response in the listener or the reader as the other ballads do. It's not a question of fact vs. fiction or accuracy vs. inaccuracy: it's a question of communicating heartfelt, shared grief vs. simple reportage of grief.

"The Yellow Tomb"--A. L. Phipps

As I implied in the introduction to the discussion of "Tragedy of School Bus 27...", my first contact with A. L. Phipps' "The Yellow Tomb" was in taping that ballad from a record¹ owned by Mrs. Virginia Jones of Huntington, West Virginia. The tape served as the basis for the transcription of the text and the tune below.

The Yellow Tomb

Come all of you good peo-ple--and lis-ten- to me-- And
 hear the sad-dest sta-ry-- the worst in his-to-ry-- of
 fa-thers and mo-thers-- that's left-- have to grieve-- Their
 homes are so emp-ty-- no chil-dren there to see-- (Chorus)
 Then
 let us all take cour-age-- we'll meet them bye-and-bye-- We'll

¹A. L. Phipps, "The Yellow Tomb," vocal by Howard Vokes, included in the album Tragedy & Disaster in Country Songs, SLP-258 (Nashville: Starday Records, n.d.).

Handwritten musical notation on three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are written below the notes.

join them in their mansion — a-bove the star-ry sky — There'll
 be no sor-row in that land, the flowers are in bloom — There'll
 be no chil-dren dy-ing in a tra-gic yel-low tomb. —

The Yellow Tomb

- [1] Come all of you good people and listen to me,
 And hear the saddest story, the worst in history...
 Of fathers and mothers that's left here to grieve.
 Their homes are so empty, no children there to see,²

(Chorus)

- [2] Then let us all take courage; we'll meet them bye-and-bye.
 We'll join them in their mansion above the starry sky.
 There'll be no sorrow in that land; the flowers are in bloom.
 There'll be no children dying in a tragic yellow tomb.
- [3] One cold Friday morning these children left their home
 To have their daily lesson; they did not plan to roam.
 They laughed and cheered each other as they went on their way.
 They did not live to enter their schoolroom that day.
- [4] The river called Big Sandy was deep and rolling high.
 Was there the schoolbus landed and there they had to die.
 Twenty³ children drowned--with the driver met his doom
 Though God seen best to call them in this tragic yellow tomb.

(Chorus)

Loyal Jones of Berea College recognized A. L. Phipps' name
 and gave me the Phipps Family Singers' Barbourville, Kentucky,
 address. I wrote to Phipps in early July, 1980, asking for specific

²Kathleen (Mrs. A. L.) Phipps, writer of the lyrics, told me that when she wrote this line, she had in mind specifically the James B. Goble family, who lost all three of their children in the disaster.

³Twenty is obviously an error, and twenty-six would not have destroyed the metrical regularity of the line. Mrs. Phipps offered no explanation for the discrepancy.

information concerning his ballad, and I followed up the letter with a phone call. I spoke with Mrs. Kathleen Phipps, A. L.'s wife and the mother of ten (two of whom, along with A. L. and Kathleen, comprise the Phipps Family Singers). It turned out that Mrs. Phipps had written the words to "The Yellow Tomb" and A. L. had written the tune.

The Phipps Family has a history dating back to the 1940's of recording both their own and others' gospel music and sentimental songs. "The Yellow Tomb" was Mrs. Phipps' first attempt at writing a disaster song. She heard about the accident from others and over the radio, and she read the newspaper coverage of the disaster. Mrs. Phipps began writing the ballad almost immediately, constantly reworking and adding to it: within ten days of the accident the lyrics were complete. Concerning the ballad, Mrs. Phipps stressed that her intention was "...to stick to the facts..." and, at the same time, to include "...something of comfort..." for the families and friends of the 27 victims. She considers the ballad something to "...help people remember--a memorial." Shortly after the writing, the Phipps Family recorded "The Yellow Tomb,"⁴ and although Mrs. Phipps is unsure of the exact date, she has promised to mail it to me as soon as she can locate the contract. The original Starday recording was re-released on the Pine Mountain label (PMR-195) in either 1977 or 1978, to the best of Mrs. Phipps' memory. She also remembered that the original recording (Starday 195)

⁴A. L. Phipps, "The Yellow Tomb," vocal by the A. L. Phipps Family, included in the album Old Time Mountain Pickin' and Singin', SLP-195 (Nashville: Starday Records, n.d.).

"...did well," although she had no figures at hand to say exactly how well. Since "The Yellow Tomb" was never released as a single, it would be nearly impossible to determine the degree to which sales figures would reflect the popularity of this particular ballad: it shares the record with fifteen other ballads and songs comprised of gospel and sentimental songs and other disaster ballads.

Mrs. Phipps had no memory of the Howard Vokes recording of her and A. L.'s ballad. As I described and read Vokes' recording to her, she was quite certain that the Phipps Family had not sung any stanza as a chorus. Otherwise, the lyrics of Vokes' recording sounded right to her. As it turns out, Mrs. Phipps was quite correct. The stanza that Vokes uses as a chorus is the fourth and last stanza sung by the Phipps Family. Compared to the text of the lyrics above (taken from the Vokes recording) the Phipps family sang it in 1-3-4-2 order with no repetition of any stanza. In other words, in the Phipps Family's recording the preachment (Vokes' chorus) retains its traditional position--last. (cf V. H. Harp's calling the preachment in "The Big Sandy Disaster," Version One, a chorus but not singing it as such. Rather, he sings it simply as the final stanza.). The only other differences in the text as the Phipps Family recorded it are the pluralizing of mansion (Vokes' stanza 2, line 2) and a slight variation in line 3 of Vokes' stanza 4. The Phipps Family sang it "Twenty children drownded; the driver met his doom...."

The "Come all ye" opening of the Phipps ballad is reminiscent

of the earlier event songs and the broadsides. "The Yellow Tomb," as recorded by the Phipps Family, develops in a familiar pattern. Their stanza 2 (Vokes' stanza 3) makes use of irony through the use of the third-person omniscient point of view. The preachment (Phipps' stanza 4, Vokes' stanza 2 or chorus) is powerful in tone and, although somewhat cliché-ridden, lends to an elevation of spirit.

Just as the Stanley Brothers recorded a slicked-up version of Adkins' ballad "Kentucky School Bus," so has Vokes recorded a fancier, more professionally arranged and recorded version of the Phipps Family's "The Yellow Tomb." The Phipps recording of the ballad is the one to consider--not the Vokes recording.

I believe the ballad as written by A. L. and Kathleen Phipps is most likely a ballad of the folk, but it is not at this time nor has it been a folk ballad.

Before I interviewed anyone in conjunction with the disaster, I had for quite some time been curious about the effects of the recorded ballads on those individuals involved directly with the accident and its aftermath. Although V. H. Harp's "The Big Sandy Disaster" brought a thousand or so requests, many from southeastern Kentucky, he had not recorded his ballad; rather he had printed it as a broadside without any indication of tune.

As the reader goes over the interviews in this study, he may be as puzzled as I was to find scant reference to the people interviewed having heard the recorded ballads played over the air or otherwise played much at all. Most certainly James Goble and Graham

Burchett were too busy with the recovery effort to have listened much to the radio. But others--Mary Caudill, Anna Sue Stumbo, Jim Smiley, and Ike Vanderpool--most likely listened to the radio regularly to learn of the progress of the recovery efforts. The former three remember hearing at least one ballad, but in each instance the hearing was almost by accident. In short, there seemed to be no "big play" of the recorded ballads in Floyd County.

The reason for Floyd County people's being quite unfamiliar with the recorded ballads became clearer during a phone conversation in May, 1980, with Estill Lee Carter, Prestonsburg auto dealer and an employee of radio station WPRT, Prestonsburg, in 1958. Carter told me that WPRT was a low-wattage AM station that, in accordance with F.C.C. regulations, went off the air daily at dusk. During the disaster, however, the station remained on the air 24 hours a day, one employee at the accident site operating a remote unit and Carter (and, presumably, an engineer) remaining at the station. Carter remembers a copy of the Stanley Brothers' "No School Bus in Heaven" coming into the station as part of a shipment from a subscription service and that the station manager set the policy of playing no such songs or ballads over the air. Carter remembers no other recordings' coming into the station, but they could very easily have been set aside by the station manager. Further, Carter assumes the same policy was made at WDOC, the other Prestonsburg radio station.

Carter recalled that throughout the disaster WPRT played only hymns, spirituals, and other inspirational music, especially any

of these types recorded by Tennessee Ernie Ford.¹ Carter also remembered that, as a result of his being overtired, he accidentally allowed Ford's recording of "Get On Board, Little Children" to be aired. When he realized what had happened, he immediately lifted the needle off the record and apologized profusely to his listeners. He received only one call about the incident, and that was from an individual who told him that the people understood that it was only a mistake and that they knew he, Carter, was working with practically no sleep.

Under the circumstances, it is easy to see why so few Floyd Countians seem to be or to have been aware of the ballads of the disaster and why the few who did hear one or more of them heard them so rarely.

¹Ford wrote a letter dated March 19, 1958, to WPRT which was printed in the Floyd County Times (3/27/58, p. 6). Ford said in part that it "...[is] an honor to have played a small part in comforting [the] people of the Commonwealth [of Kentucky]."

III. The Poems of the Disaster

Several poems--chiefly narrative and only occasionally lyric--were written about the 1958 Floyd County school bus disaster. I include here copies of all the poems I have recovered to date: five narrative poems, one narrative fragment, and one lyric poem. The reader is by now sufficiently familiar with the historic event to which these poems are a response and has read six narratives (the ballads), their background, and their analyses. For these reasons I present the poems with little comment or analysis. Although I assume the reader no longer needs to have inaccuracies in factual content pointed out, I have included details about each poem's recovery and other pertinent information. In only one instance have I sought out a poet, and his poem is not included for reasons I shall give toward the end of this section of the study.

The poems vary widely in their writers' ability to convey genuine emotion as well as in the poets' ability to handle with facility the problems of metrics, rhyme, diction, point of view, and so on.

Sp./3 Elmer F. Fields, stationed with the U. S. Army in Japan in 1958, wrote "Tragedy," a narrative poem about the disaster. He mailed it to the Floyd County Times and paid for its publication in the March 20, 1958, issue.¹ Fields, for all his

¹Editor Norman Allen of the Times told me during an interview on May 9, 1980, that he never published a poem in his paper without payment. Otherwise, he said, he would be deluged with poetry and would have to spend much of his time telling less-successful poets why he wouldn't publish their efforts.

inaccuracies, seems to rise above the mundane in his simply stated but powerful final stanzas.

Tragedy²

by Sp./3 Elmer F. Fields

In the hills of Southeastern Kentucky
Where a river called Big Sandy flows,
Unleashed by the furies of nature
And swollen by the new melted snows,

Things were as normal that morning in March,
Just a typical cold winter day,
Kids had their books and as often before
Were preparing to be on their way.

They kissed their mothers and fathers goodby
As the school bus came down the road--
Just a big yellow casket on a road to doom
With the world's most precious load.

Well, the school bus moved on down the crooked road
Until a wrecker moved out in its way;
The bus then collided and the children screamed
As the school bus began to sway.

Then down the river the school bus rolled
And into the water it dived
Twenty-six children were drowned that day
While sixteen others survived.

The news then was taken to the mothers and dads
And thousands of teardrops were shed;
Then with a prayer that survivors were one of their own,
Down to the river the river they fled.

Heads were bowed down and tears fell like rain
As the muddy, old river rolled on;
A young mother prayed as she accepted the truth
All three of her children were gone.

Well, the tragedy happened and the world said a prayer,
For they knew that those children would be
On the road shorter and straighter by far
Than Highway 23.

²The Floyd County Times, 20 March 1958, section 2, p. 3.

Ilva (Mrs. Leo) Roth of West Liberty, Ohio, wrote a letter to the Disaster Committee in which she included a copy of the poem below.³ She requested that each family be given a copy of her poem and that the numbers referring to victims and survivors be corrected in that she did not have access to the correct figures at the time of her writing the letter. She wrote that her reason for wanting each family to have a copy is that when she was younger, a train had hit a sleigh near her former home and had killed ten people. A poem was written (presumably by a local bard) about the disaster, the families were given copies of the poem, and they were "...so glad for it."

A Group of Happy Children

A group of happy children
Eagerly going to school
Laughing and joking and having fun.
As only a group in a school bus would rule.

Thirty-three children eager to know,
But a savior so kind came to take them to heavens shore.
Just twelve of the children can go on,
And learn what the world has in store.

A driver with great responsibility,
Has not lived to tell,
For God took his responsibility,
And made it His own.

When suddenly something happened.
No one on earth can know why.
To claim twenty-one children and driver.
And ushered them to that home in the sky.

³Ilva Roth, Letter to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, 27 March 1958, untitled collection of letters to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, vol. 2, Floyd County Public Library, Prestonsburg, Kentucky.

Dear God, I pray comfort those who are left.
 And in there agony find in Thee sweet rest.
 And those who have gone on before,
 Give them peace on the other shore.

May no soul be so unkind,
 As to try to place the blame.
 As that wouldn't bring back the kin.
 And would only put them to shame.

May each have the Grace to accept God.
 This tragedy without God's help they never can.
 And help them to feel He must have a special place.
 For twenty-one children and a driver at His right hand.

Yes, to meet their maker and God.
 These twenty-one children and driver have gone.
 Again we pray, "Dear Lord, kindly hold the hand
 Of those who are left to mourn.

Help them to grasp that faith secure,
 So they can meet there loved ones on the other shore.
 Lord, give them strength to endure,
 And strive for that home where they can be together for
 ever more.

I believe, Dear God, in that special place
 Reserved for those over on heavens shore,
 Families will be rejoined together for a reunion.
 Never to part any more."

The Angles will bow their heads for joy.
 And take the ones left aside
 And talk over with them the why,
 Yes, we'll understand it better by and by.

While attending the Kentucky Highlands Folk Festival near Prestonsburg in September, 1979, I met Mrs. Kathryn Frazier, the director of the festival. By coincidence, Mrs. Frazier mentioned that she had just read a poem in a scrapbook belonging to Mrs. Docia Woods. The poem was on the subject of the bus disaster. I immediately sought out Mrs. Woods, who let me read through her collection. In her scrapbook were two complete and two fragmentary narrative poems about the disaster. She told me

that the poems as she had them were given to her as part of a class assignment years before when she had taught English at Eastern Kentucky State College (now Eastern Kentucky University). The poems came as part of a larger project written by one of her students, Brenda Sue Scalf. Miss Scalf is the daughter of the deceased Henry (Buck) Scalf, who was the reporter for the Floyd County Times who received a meritorious service award for his writing about the bus disaster. Miss Scalf had turned in to Mrs. Woods part of a scrapbook collection that her father had made for her.

Mrs. Woods allowed me to read the poems and the fragments onto tape, and I later transcribed them as they appear below. I phoned Scalf's widow, Mrs. Nora Scalf, explained the nature of this study, and requested a meeting with her. I told her I was in hopes of finding other poems in the scrapbook collection Buck had made for his daughter, Brenda Sue. Mrs. Scalf enthusiastically agreed to an interview, and she said that she would gather together what written material she could find. However, shortly before the planned interview, she wrote me that such a meeting would not be convenient and that the family had decided to publish original material Buck had written. Further, no one would receive access to any of Scalf's material until after publication under her daughter Brenda Sue's direction. I wrote Mrs. Scalf again to assure her that I wanted none of Buck's work and that I was interested only in the poems that had come to Buck much the same as other poems had come to me. I included copies of all the material I had recovered up until that time (May 15, 1980), but as of this

writing I have had no reply. Perhaps I may have access to the scrapbook collection after the publication of Buck Scalf's original work.

The first bus disaster poem in the material preserved by Mrs. Woods is an anonymous narrative, which I include here without further comment.

The Schoolbus Wreck
(my own county, Floyd County, Kentucky)

The little children left their homes so happy and gay
They hadn't got far away
Till they left the bus to return no more
They are now living on the eternal shore.

Dear fathers and mothers are left to weep and moan
They know their children will never return back home
They are living with God in heaven on that beautiful shore
Fathers and mothers can prepare to meet them where parting will
be no more.

They can take them by the hand and live forever with Jesus in
that happy land
Where sorrow nor death can't reach that happy place
The little children left their home so dark and sad
They went to meet their Savior, the best friend they ever had.

We will meet Jesus and loved ones up there in heaven... We will
walk the streets of gold
In that bright city where the sweet little children will never
grow old
There is a bright mansion for all who'll obey Jesus and live in
his way.
Jesus bids us come to his happy home on high

There will be no more school bus wrecks nigh
There will be no more suffering; we will nevermore die
There will be no more school bus wrecks in heaven
We will never no more say goodbye.

Also from Mrs. Woods's copy of Brenda Sue Scalf's material gathered by her father is "Deepest Regret," a short narrative by Virginia Bates of Melvin, Kentucky. Preceding the poem is the

comment that the disaster "...brought an effusion of this kind of versification...."

Deepest Regret

by Virginia Bates

The twenty-eighty of February
Nearing eight o'clock
The earth was shook
With a might shock.

'Twas the schoolbus tragedy
We will never know the answer
Which plunged into the river
Just above Lancer,

A high plunge into the river
Just out of town
Where twenty-six children
And a bus driver were drowned.

No doubt they struggled
Their lives to save
But the huge yellow coach
Went to a watery grave.

Mrs. Woods's material also contains an untitled fragment of a narrative by Wallace J. Johnson, Sr., of Williamson, West Virginia. Preceding the single stanza is the comment that this fragment is from "...a 12 stanza ballad poem-- [the] first [stanza is] given here."

"In nineteen hundred fifty-eight
One February morn ing?
The sun withheld its ardent rays
And God withheld his warning."

In addition to the two narrative poems and the narrative fragment, Mrs. Woods's material also contains the opening of a narrative poem written by Clara Chassell Cooper of Berea, Kentucky. With the help of Ike and Kathy Vanderpool (see interview later

in this study), I located Mrs. Cooper's complete poem entitled "Dirge For Kentucky School Children" and a second poem--a lyric-- by Mrs. Cooper: "Levisa Lament."

Clara Chassell Cooper is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. In 1973 she printed privately her collected poems, Recorded Insights: Poems of Yesterday for Tomorrow. Among her poems are two on the subject of the Floyd County bus disaster.

Dirge For Kentucky School Children⁴

by Clara Chassell Cooper

When morning dawned that February day
No portent marked the bleak Kentucky sky,
No falling star, no lurid gleam, to say,
"Ere school bells ring, some twenty children die!"

The chores were done, the breakfast served, one eye
Clockways, the books and wraps assembled; then
They waited for the school bus to come by--
Floyd County's little women, little men.

At length the school bus loomed within their ken;
The driver stopped, a gay good morning said--
Thus soon was gathered from each glade and glen
That morning's cheerful cargo of the dead.

A narrow road, a steep descent; ahead,
Around a curve, a sudden barrier loomed;
A swift impact; the bus careened, and sped
Down toward the swollen current with the doomed!

Though some escaped, the rest were trapped, entombed
In an untimely, unsought, watery grave,
Their hopes and aspirations all consumed-
Beneath Levisa's surging, treacherous wave.

A dazed community, bereft, forlorn,
Weeps, while Kentucky and the nation mourn.

March, 1958

⁴Clara Chassell Cooper, Recorded Insights... (Berea, Kentucky: Clara Chassell Cooper, 1973), p. 90.

Levisa Lament⁵

by Clara Chassell Cooper

O Levisa, sullen river,
Yield the bodies of our dead!
Heaven forbid that they forever
Lie entombed in river bed!

Plying daily o'er the surface
Men in boats row to and fro,
Searching, searching with grim purpose
For the lost in depths below.

Women left at home are wailing,
Worn with waiting, torn by grief,
Why the search so unavailing?
God, when wilt thou send relief?

"O dear children, what could hold you?
Will you not return anon?
In our arms we would enfold you;
All too long you have been gone!

"Round about you played so gaily--
Was it only yestermorn?
Off to school you must go daily,
Though it leaves our hearts forlorn."

O Levisa, sullen river,
Yield the bodies of our dead!
Heaven forbid that they forever
Lie entombed in river bed!

Whence will come surcease of sorrow,
O'er the valley lingering still?--
Live today, forget tomorrow?
Move away from yonder hill?

God of mercy, grant us power
To accept and do thy will;
Though the clouds of doubt may lower,
In our hearts new faith instill!

March 31, 1958

It is apparent that Mrs. Cooper's two poems are not folk poetry in that Mrs. Cooper is very much aware of the literary or written tradition of poetry. Her approach is highly formal, her

⁵Ibid., p. 91.

metrics regular and flawless (although occasionally strained), and her rhyme schemes intricate. Further, her poetry gives evidence of other, more sophisticated characteristics of much high-art poetry (e.g., enjambed lines and matters of diction) that, when combined with the earlier-mentioned features of her poetry and her tone, move her expressions out of the realm of the folk.

In the two volumes of letters to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, I found two more letters that made reference to enclosed poems, but those enclosures were not part of the collection.

In an advertisement I placed in both the Floyd County Times and the Lexington Herald, I asked for any information about "... songs, song-ballads, or poems..." pertaining to the disaster. Of five replies, one individual offered research help, three offered to record their copies of the Stanley Brothers' "No School Bus in Heaven" if I would send them the tape, and one--Mr. Lacy Blackburn--said that he had a poem written by himself and that he would be glad to discuss it. The replies came to Mrs. Mary Caudill, whose name and Martin, Kentucky, post office box I had used in the advertisement. Mrs. Caudill called Blackburn to tell him of our interest, and I later called Blackburn and set a date for an interview.

Lacy Blackburn of Drift, Kentucky, is a cordial man who has lived in the same house since 1931. A miner until 1970, he is now retired, is still a strong UMWA man, and is proud of never having to go more than eight miles in any direction from Drift to find work in the mines.

Over a three-day period during the week after the bus wreck, Blackburn wrote a 44-line, iambic hexameter (or, more likely, double trimeter), rhyming-couplet narrative poem about the disaster. Blackburn has written several other poems, chiefly religious in nature; however, he is particularly proud of his bus disaster poem. When I asked his permission to read it onto tape, he refused, saying that he "...wouldn't feel comfortable" letting me have a copy or letting me read it onto tape. He wrote the poem "...just to get it [the disaster] off my chest." He also said that he had always had intended to revise it, but that he had never done so.

The poem, as I remember it, is clearly a folk product, and its tone is one of genuine grief and concern for both the victims and the survivors. In that Mr. Blackburn appears to be, in many respects, a very private man who is fiercely proud (but not boastful) of his work, I pursued getting a copy of his poem no further. Perhaps some day he shall allow me to have a copy.

Most of the poems (with the exception of Mrs. Cooper's two poems, although they, too, follow much of the pattern) follow the same pattern as the ballads. They begin with the events of the disaster, they move on to express the grief felt by parents and others involved in the disaster, and they conclude on a religious note, usually implying or actually stating that the victims, their friends, and their families shall one day be reunited in the presence of God. Such is the poetic response (whether in narrative poem or ballad) of the folk to a disaster that touched not only a single community, but also a nation.

IV. Elements of Folklore and the School Bus Disaster

Graham Burchett and James Beta Goble were intimately involved with the disaster from the beginning and continue to remain active with the Floyd County Emergency & Rescue Squad, the organization that grew directly out of the Prestonsburg Schoolchildren Recovery Committee. Burchett, who was the director of civilian recovery efforts for the Committee, and Goble, who was the Committee's treasurer, were on the river from shortly after the accident on February 28, 1958, until the last child's body was recovered on May 10, 1958, 71 days after the accident. Burchett was "...related to half the children on the bus." Goble and his wife, Virginia, lost two sons and a daughter in the disaster. Mrs. Mary Griffie Caudill, whom I later interviewed about her memories of the disaster (see interview later in this study), contacted Burchett and Goble on my behalf, and she arranged the initial interview with them. We met on June 10, 1979, in the Prestonsburg Rescue Squad building. The men were open, friendly, and interested in the proposed study. They chose not to have the interview recorded on tape because they felt they could speak more easily without the imposition of the machine. They spoke for nearly two hours about the accident and its aftermath, and they confirmed generally all that I had read about the disaster. They gave a firsthand report of the experience I had read and heard about only secondhand.

In addition to confirming generally the accuracy of the reportage of the disaster, they looked over the poems and ballads

I had recovered up until that time, and they pointed out both accuracies and inaccuracies in the "ballad truth." They had not seen copies of the ballads or poems before. Goble mentioned that perhaps he had heard one ballad sometime in the past, but he could not remember which one. Both men stated that since they had almost literally lived on the river for over two months, they would not have been likely to hear any of the recorded ballads even if they had been played by local radio stations. Goble stated and Burchett concurred that the ballads, if taken as a whole, present a fairly accurate picture of what actually happened.

Naturally the men were curious about my interest in the disaster. Apparently over the years various individuals would have liked to exploit the disaster for personal gain, or at least for no good purpose. Burchett recalled that so thick were the curiosity seekers and the souvenir hunters after the accident, he ordered bus #27 cut up with torches and bulldozed under the ground. No Floyd County school bus has borne that number since. One reason that neither a marker nor a memorial arch has been placed at the site of the accident is the concern that one way, or another commercial enterprise might have entered the picture. After I explained that my interest lay chiefly in the ballads and their relationship to the historic event, they agreed to provide what help they could.

During that interview and during a subsequent meeting held on August 13, 1980, Burchett and Goble discussed freely many events in conjunction with the disaster that were not reported

by the media at that time or since. Of particular interest to folklorists and to students of folklore are various practices or methods employed in attempting to find the missing victims' bodies. Burchett emphasized the Committee's willingness to have gone along with any suggestion made by the victims' parents or next of kin that aimed at recovering the bodies, regardless of the Committee members' personal feelings about any suggested plan's efficacy. In Burchett's words, "Anything anyone suggested, we tried."

Apparently someone told several parents of victims about "a man from St. Louis" who had a reputation for success in divining drowning victims. The parents met with Burchett and Goble, who, in turn, prevailed upon Floyd County Judge Henry Stumbo to call the diviner in St. Louis. The Recovery Committee paid over \$700.00 in travel and living expenses for approximately ten days of the diviner's aid. His divining device consisted of joined brass rods connected by wires to flashlight batteries carried in a pouch at his waist. Burchett and Goble reported that the diviner also used human hair--his own--somehow in his method. The diviner found no bodies during the ten-or-so days he worked, and Burchett suggested that he leave before raising the impatience and anger of local people. The diviner took Burchett's suggestion to heart.

Other diviners or water-witches tried their skill and failed; and, according to Burchett and Goble, several of them made use of human hair, toenails, or both in their attempts to locate the victims' bodies. Such attempts at the location fall broadly under

Stith Thompson's Motif D 1816.4.1, location of drowned person detected by magic.

It is interesting that several of these individuals made use of human hair and nail parings with their divining devices. Such use seems to be a variation of the principle of contagious magic (magic of touch), which holds that items or objects at one time connected or in contact with each other maintain a sympathetic bond even after they are physically separated. To fulfill the requirements of contagious magic, the hair and nail parings would need to have been from the victims, and then these "parts" presumably would have aided in seeking the rest of the body to which at one time they had been physically joined and with which they remained in sympathy. In the instance of the bus disaster, however, hair and nail parings belonging to the victims were unavailable, so others' hair and parings were employed. Whether the source of the hair and the parings was of any importance to the diviners at the disaster site is unknown. Perhaps these instances of practice are variations of the principle of contagious magic, or perhaps they are merely a watering-down of older, more primitive practices.

In a letter dated April 7, 1958, a Captain James I. Hollon of Hazel Green, Kentucky, wrote to Burt Spurlock of the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee stating that although he had offered his help in locating the seven missing bodies some two and one-half weeks before, people had taken him for a crackpot, and he "...had become rather peeved and took the bus back home." However, he wrote, he had returned on the Saturday before the letter's

writing and had been allowed to use his method in attempting to find the bodies. Following is an extended quote from Hollon's letter:¹

...They immediately took me down to their boat landing and had a motor boat ready to take me up the river to the scene of the tragedy. They took every precaution to protect me as they were informed that I was aged and rather infirm and as soon as we started I took out my instrument and behold it picked up one of the bodies right by us. I counted up the seven bodies almost together and not many yards from their boat landing and directly behind the Municipal Bldg. all close together and I suppose in the very place where nobody suspected they would be....

...[I] work with an instrument of my own making and I am pretty sure that I know a scientific fact that I think has not come to any scientist anywhere yet and I hope never will because it would disrupt the business of the world by concentrating the assets of the world in the hands of those who have the money with which to buy the property now.

I call the science "magnetic affinity." The old "peach tree" switch [is of] some merit but the user don't know why but I do.

As we went up the river I spotted and counted the seven bodies and we came back to the boat landing I had the men get seven stakes and I walked up the shore as close to the water as I dared and had the men drive a stake oposite [sic] each body.

On Sunday morning I went down to the boat landing and lo! the river met me coming up the bank. It rained very hard during the night and [I] did know it. I was so tired that I went to sleep and the thunder could not wake me up.

I suppose that they will be working at the search as soon as the river and the weather permit. I don't think they should disturb anything without my being there because if they disturb one body in that sand it might cause others to be released and get away and have to be hunted again.

I am writing you this letter to inform you what I have done and in the event the bodies are recovered at the place staked out by me that I would be entitled to the rewards offered for their finding.

Captain Hollon concludes that if his services should be needed again, the "fund" should pay his expenses in that he himself could not afford much and had already spent \$40.00 in his efforts.

¹Capt. James I. Hollon, Letter to Mr. Burl Spurlock, 5 April 1958, untitled collection of letters to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, vol. 2, Floyd County Public Library, Prestonsburg, KY.

As Burchett and Goble remember the device that allowed Hollon to make use of his principle of "magnetic affinity," it was a sort of plumb-bob connected to a brass rod. To the bob were connected a battery or batteries and earphones through which a ticking was heard as the device located a body. Although Hollon claims in his letter that he and his device had located seven victims, none were found where Hollon indicated they were. Burchett and Goble said that what actually helped them most in locating victims was the rise and fall of the river during the rains of March and April. The motion caused several bodies to be turned free from submerged trees and brush. The recovery workers also induced that motion in the water by running heavy power boats in order to create large wakes to float or jostle the bodies free. At least three bodies were recovered in this manner.

Burchett and Goble had no faith in the attempts of the diviners. They believe that the diviners had come chiefly for the personal attention they would receive from people who were willing to try any means to recover their children's bodies. Obviously some diviners sought only the reward money of \$1000 per body. When I asked Burchett and Goble if they thought that the diviners actually believed they could locate drowning victims with their methods, they agreed that many of them probably did. However, the endeavors of all the diviners came to nothing.

Some parents took various articles of clothing belonging to their missing children and put them into the water in hopes

that they would float to where their drowned owners were and would sink to meet them. Two suggestions for use of this method came in the form of letters to Burl Spurlock and the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee. I include them here not so much for their basic idea as for their detail, their tone, and the writers' apparent belief in the effectiveness of the practice.

President, First Nat. Bank, Prestonsburg

Dear Sir I know you will think it strange I am telling you this but if you will try something my Mother told me many years ago to find anyone that had drowned to put the last piece of clothing [that the drowned person wore] such as an under garment in the water it would float until it came to the body and would sink over the drowned person this may sound foolish to you but please try it anyway. have a boat follow the garment.²

In reproducing the letters above and below, I have changed no spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or point of grammar. It is interesting in the above letter that the writer is concerned with her appearing foolish in the eyes of the reader.

Monday A.M. Just heard the news and so sorrow you have not as yet found 7 of these Dear Children--Pleas try this I have all ways heard of my grand Parents and Parents say if you would take some of the last clothing the [indecipherable] Pull of [off?] and Put it in the water where they went in at these clothing would goe where thare Body was at and go down and a few years back that was done here a Height Falls [?] Ky a Bratche [?] women drowned they looked for her body could not find it they took her last dress she had [indecipherable] put it in the water where she went down at and followed it it went down they found her Body hung in a tree top so pleas try this maby you can find those Bodys of those Dear children.³

Can anyone doubt the genuine concern and desire to help that is apparent in these letters?

²E. Brown, Letter to Burl Spurlock, 15 March 1958, ibid.

³R. M. D., Letter to Burl Spurlock, n.d., ibid.

As in the case of the diviners who used human hair and nail parings (albeit not those of the victims), the use of victims' clothing to locate their bodies involves contagious magic, in this case magic of touch in a literal sense. In both letters above as well as in the memories of Burchett and Goble, the clothing used had to belong to the victim. In addition, both letters insist that the recentness of the victim's having worn the article of clothing is an important factor in the method's success. Neither Burchett nor Goble is aware of floating clothing's having helped locate any of the missing bodies.

Another recovery method practiced had to do with various parts of the corn plant. Burchett and Goble remember an instance of someone's throwing a bundle of corn tops into the water with the expectation that the bundle would go to where a body was submerged and swirl around as if in a whirlpool. Two letters that came to Burt Spurlock and the Disaster Committee suggested using corn in one way or another to locate the bodies.

To Whom it Concerns:

Please notify the divers searching for those last bodies to use bundles of "fodder" made from the blades of cornstalks. They will definitely locate dead bodies.⁴

The second letter suggests taking fifteen leaves from cornstalks, making a wreath of them, and putting the wreath into the water where the bodies went in. No further instructions are included, nor are any particular results anticipated. Curiously, the letter concludes: "It makes a pretty scene."

One of the most interesting methods employed in locating

⁴Martha C. McMillan, Letter to the Prestonsburg Disaster Committee, 3 March 1958, ibid.

the victims involved the use of a sheep. One individual suggested killing a sheep and letting it float to the missing bodies. A second person insisted that the sheep had to be drowned if the method were to be effective. A volunteer drowned a sheep, and Graham Burchett tied a commode float to the sheep with a length of cord so that it could be followed if it submerged. Sometime later the sheep became lodged in a tree some distance downstream, and neighbors complained of the odor, real or anticipated. Burchett asked for volunteers to dislodge and bury the sheep. On the way to retrieve the animal, the volunteers found the body of one of the disaster victims. Although the drowned sheep had nothing to do with locating the body, some people saw a cause-and-effect relationship between the drowned sheep and the recovery of the body, thereby allowing continued belief by some in the efficacy of the method.

The insistence on the sheep's being drowned shows the principle of homeopathic magic, or magic of similarity, at work. The apparent assumption is that there is a sympathetic relationship based on drowning between the sheep and the victims. It is interesting that the first suggestion concerning the use of the sheep did not include drowning. The link of drowning, which clearly places the method within the realm of homeopathic magic, is the same kind of link that is missing in the diviners' use of human hair and nail parings in their method of locating victims. Had someone not insisted upon the sheep's not simply being killed, but drowned, the connection between the method and homeopathic magic may have been entirely overlooked.

Another motif of folklore I have encountered in connection with the school bus disaster is the belief that people's hair turned color as a result of the disaster. The first instance I came across of this belief was reported to me by an informant who mentioned some years ago that I should talk to Izaak (Ike) Vanderpool about the disaster. Vanderpool, who survived the disaster, was seated directly behind bus driver John Derossett when bus #27 went into the river (see the interview with Vanderpool later in this study). The informant, who had known Vanderpool for many years, told me in all honest belief--and he later reiterated--that Ike's hair had turned totally gray or white as a result of the harrowing experience (Motif F 1041.7, hair turns gray from terror). When I met Vanderpool in May, 1980, I was surprised to discover that his hair was only beginning to turn gray. Certainly my informant knew the color of Ike's hair. Perhaps he also believed that after a period of time hair thus transformed would return to its normal color--I cannot say.

The second instance I encountered of hair reputedly turning gray came from Vanderpool. After the taped portion of the interview, Ike mentioned that Mrs. Virginia Goble's hair turned gray as a result of her and her husband James' having lost all three of their children in the disaster (Motif F 1041.21, reactions to excessive grief). When I mentioned to Ike that I had heard that his hair had also turned gray as a result of the disaster, he laughed and said that he had used the phrase figuratively in reference to Mrs. Goble, who, it seemed to Ike, did appear to

age or to grow older more quickly after the disaster. I have no doubt that Ike did speak figuratively in reference to Mrs. Goble. What especially raises my interest and curiosity about the "hair turned gray or white" motif is the extent to which one person's figurative description becomes another person's literal description, or the degree to which there is interplay between the figurative and the literal. More guardedly, I wonder about the extent to which we may eventually take even our own oft-repeated figurative speech literally. Obviously this is speculation for another study.

Other occurrences include an informant's telling me that he had direct knowledge of a mother who told her children on the morning of the disaster not to prepare to go to school. When they asked her why not, she said that she didn't know--but they were not to go to school that day. The children were transported to school daily on bus #27. As a result of their mother's apparent premonition, they were not aboard the bus when it plunged into the Sandy.

Also circulating in Floyd County orally is the belief that the Goble's fourth child, a daughter born three or four years after the disaster, is indeed a heaven-sent child. I mentioned the belief to James Goble during our second meeting, and he said that he and his wife tended to believe it themselves. The Gobles wanted another child as quickly as possible after the loss of their three children in the disaster. Goble told me that his wife suffered many miscarriages before the birth of their second daughter and that they had almost lost the latter by asphyxiation

at birth. Most happily she survived and is enrolled as a college freshman at this writing.

The discussion of W. C. Burchett's "Tragedy of School Bus 27..." earlier in this study included comment on the coincidence of the number 27's entering the oral tradition. Also reported to me with great certainty at least twice by students from Floyd County was that the late Rod Serling had come to Prestonsburg poking about in hopes of building the plot of a "Twilight Zone" television episode on the coincidental repetition of the number 27--the bus's number, the driver's age, and the number of victims. In both instances of the report, Serling was prevailed upon to leave before he found himself in trouble with the parents of victims and others involved in the recovery effort. Neither Burchett nor Goble had ever heard the story, although both knew who Rod Serling was. Perhaps such stories, although not literally true, are a means of expressing a more general feeling or belief: no group wishes to have its misfortune exploited for profit--especially by an outsider.

V. Transcripts of the Taped Interviews

Following are transcripts of taped interviews with five individuals who were involved in varying degrees with the Floyd County school bus disaster. Each of the five transcripts has been edited only to the extent that inaudible and hopelessly garbled passages have been so indicated or have been reconstructed in brackets, punctuation to aid the reader's clearer understanding has been added as necessary, and pauses and rapid changes in thought have been indicated by triple periods (. . .).

Only in the interview with V. H. Harp has any material been edited out of the transcript. Material so removed has been indicated by a triple space and periods widely separated across the page. The material left out, although of interest to the writer, has no bearing whatsoever on the disaster.

I first met Mary Griffie Caudill in early 1979. An article about my interest in collecting folklore had appeared in the Floyd County Times. Mary wrote me a kind and encouraging letter and called me at my campus office one afternoon just as I was trying to call her. We finally met when she came to campus to work out a few details for a course she was taking by correspondence.

Mary is in her mid-forties. Poor health prevents her teaching or otherwise working full-time away from home, so much of her energy over the past several years has been spent in collecting local folklore and ascertaining the facts behind local legends. Mary has been a student of folklorist Leonard Roberts at Pikeville College, where she received her B.A. She has taken graduate work through Pikeville College and at Morehead State University.

One of the first things I asked Mary was what she knew about the Big Sandy disaster. She told me that she remembered a great deal in that her first year of teaching was in Floyd County in 1957-1958. She invited me to visit her and her family in Orkney, Kentucky, and she promised to introduce me to several individuals whom I, as a student of folklore, would enjoy meeting.

My first visit to Orkney led to the following taped interview with Mary. I had arrived at about noon on July 13, 1979; and after a full day of getting to know each other better and Mary's guiding me through interviews with two elderly, life-long residents of Floyd County, the following interview took place at about 11:00 p.m. The situation was relaxed.

Taped interview--July 13, 1979--Mrs. Mary Griffie Caudill of Orkney, Kentucky.

The Big Sandy School Bus Disaster

G. R. Dobler: ...very well, of course you were teaching--let me see, where did you tell me you were teaching--right down the road from here I guess in a one-room school house at that time.

Mary Caudill: Yes, I suppose about two and one-half miles down there and another couple of miles off the main highway up in a place that they call Neds Fork or Fraziers Creek--there's several forks up in there, but there was three different one-room schools up in there and I had the middle one.

GRD: That was your first year of teaching.

MC: That was my first year of teaching in '57 and '58...and I had grades one through six...and the kids were advised especially during the winter months to stay at home because all of them walked to school, and some of them over two miles. And even I couldn't drive closer than that on the worst days. At that point in time it was the teacher or the principal that made the decision not to have school. It was not a county-wide thing like it is now. I got to school before the young man that always made the fires for us.

GRD: He was one of your students, right?

MC: He was a sixth grader, he was the little Keithly boy, and he was never late. He came in around 8:30 or maybe a quarter of nine, and the first thing he said when he came in the door--he didn't apologize for being late or even give an excuse for it--but considering the bleakness of the day and so forth, I wouldn't of asked him for one anyway. As soon as he came in the door he said, "Mrs. Caudill, there has been a school bus wreck and they think that there were several children drowned on it." And I suppose that my first reaction to it was pretty much like everybody else's reaction...that it could happen to somebody else, but not to me; or it could happen somewhere else, but not here. And I did say to him "Did you know where it was?" But more as a force of habit than anything else because, well, accidents do happen, and kids do exaggerate; and when someone comes in and tells you something like that, you want to believe it is an exaggeration whether it is or not. He said this one happened in Prestonsburg.

- MC: So, since I didn't have all the kids there that day anyway, I took them all out to the car and turned the car radio on. That was all that was on there--every radio station that you could pick up--a school bus had plunged into the Big Sandy River just below the Knotly Hollow Bridge at Emma. The number of casualties at that point was unknown, and they stressed the point that there were survivors. They also stressed the point that there was a mother that had just put four children on the bus, but I don't know that the lady was the mother of the four. I just know that four children got on the last stop that the bus made.
- GRD: ...that was the Knotly Hollow Bridge.
- MC: ...at the Knotly Hollow Bridge. Then supposedly a wrecker appeared out of nowhere and the bus careened over the embankment, and they hastened to point out the fact that the river was swollen. That would probably account for a higher death toll than would normally would be expected. Almost every radio announcer that we had at that time, particularly the man who serves as Floyd County clerk now, C. Ollie Robinson, said that we don't like to think about casualties in such cases like this but we do have to be realistic. Very shortly thereafter, there was a communique that was read from Mr. V. O. Turner, who was superintendent of Floyd County Schools at that time and is currently an associate professor of education and economics at Pikeville College, asked that all schools dismiss and all bus drivers return to their posts until further notice. Then came the state police plea that if you don't have any business down there, don't go, unless you could provide some help or some assistance in some way. We were down there, I suppose before noon or around noon, because I know we made cakes and some sandwiches and took down there. The crowd increased.
- GRD: What do remember about the size of that crowd, Mary? I read in the paper at that time there were hundreds of cars parked along 23 in each direction.
- MC: You could walk for two or three miles without much trouble, especially on the Sunday when they pulled the bus out of the river. That was one horrifying experience.
- GRD: Were you down there when they pulled the bus out?
- MC: ...but I did not go to the funeral home to view the bodies. Because I like to think anyway that I am not that morbid. I felt for the parents, although I had no children of my own, but my reaction was that the kids that I was teaching at that particular time were a part of me, and therefore I could share the grief that those parents must have had.

MC: At that point of time I was not past questioning why. Now, my mom went to every funeral that they had, even when they had the closed caskets and the pictures sitting on top of them.

GRD: I would presume probably that your mom knew many of the parents.

MC: No.

GRD: No?

MC: She may have known the Gobles because he had fishing business down there--you know, I showed you where he lived--when after you passed his place of business which is fishing tackle and bait and what have you (since I don't fish, I don't know what all you buy), but anyway, you could turn to the right there and go out that road and turn around and come into Dewey Lake another way. You could also buy picnic supplies there. It is highly probable that Mom and Dad may have known him through that. But now, Mrs. Coble was a teacher in this county at that time. I think she taught at Prestonsburg.

GRD: Yes, I remember reading that Virginia Goble was a teacher.

MC: Well now, that I wasn't absolutely sure of.

GRD: I do remember reading that I think. Was she teaching at the time, incidently?

MC: Yes.

GRD: Oh, boy.

MC: I don't know what happened to the child that had his arm off. One of the little boys was one-armed.

GRD: Yes, I can't remember whether it was John or James.

MC: That was the one that the father found last.

GRD: That was James. That was his twelve-year old, which was, I think, the second last child found. That was in May, I believe, or pretty close to May.

MC: Well now, you could figure it up exactly at one end..look.. 27th of February or the 28th?

GRD: The 28th of February, and I believe the last child was found on just about the tenth of May..there is something like 71 days total..

- MC: Well now, Graham Burchett told me 64.
- GRD: Well, I am sure that his records are accurate.
- MC: He said that they were on the water 64 days and nights...
- GRD: Well, newspapers sometimes get a little bit confused on numbers.
- MC: ...until the last child was brought out.
- GRD: Tell me, back on that Friday, Saturday, and Sunday down by the river, was your impression that people were simply gathering out of curiosity, or were people actually there to help and falling all over each other to do what they could? Do you have any remembrance of that sort of thing?
- MC: I would say a little bit of both, since that sort of thing is not common. I know that there is no parallel to the two. When this county was integrated the same thing happened. There was people here that could not in any way help the situation. They could make it worse. Some of them probably did. I wasn't involved in that.
- GRD: From what I read about the state police and national guard, they really had their hands full just trying to keep crowds from...
- MC: They did. And there was quite a few people that were inebriated and so on, and the bus driver was under heavy criticism and him dead. I sometimes think that the man died on the bus on purpose because I get the feeling that if he had gotten off there that he would have never gotten to the top of that bank, and it would not necessarily have been the parents.
- GRD: Well, from all I have read it sounds as though he practically froze at the wheel after hitting the left rear of that tow truck--he just simply lost it.
- MC: But nobody could ever account for what the tow truck was doing there.
- GRD: He had pulled over to check out a pick-up truck that was pulled off to the side of the road, and according to eye-witnesses, the tow truck driver, Mr. Horn, did give hand signals, the brake lights were present, but the brake lights on the bus never went on, nor did it ever slow down.
- MC: No, now I remember that, that it went into a skid when it rounded that curve and then when it went down it made a horrible sized-gulley.

- GRD: Oh, I could well imagine that. I think it went down something like 80 feet.
- MC: But now, I don't think that I would have any doubt that many of those children would have survived had that river not been swollen.
- GRD: That was the impression. It is usually about two feet deep now; it was, what did you say, between twenty and thirty feet deep?
- MC: Most of the time you could see the bottom of it. It was clear then and it isn't now. Even though it is down to its normal size, it's not clear any more. Kids waded along through there in the summer time, waded in the sand and carried on. You could go down there just about any hot day and see a bunch of them playing there. I don't know that it was any of them that was in the bus or anything like that, but apparently there was some safety in the fact that there was seldom an adult seen with them and the children were of all ages and, too, that was before Dewey Lake became such a popular resort place and I imagine a good many of them, like myself, the only place they had to play if they wanted to go near the water was the creek bank.
- GRD: Well, from what I read things happened very, very quickly. Mr. Horn, who had been driving the tow truck, ran down into the water and I guess, with the help of some child pushing inside, managed to get the emergency door opened, and he said if the thing had floated for another minute they would have gotten everybody out. But apparently it sank very, very rapidly, and anything that could go wrong did.
- MC: Well, there was no actual litigation in that, I don't think. But after your inquiries about it and I went to working on it for you; (I don't know how many people I have talked to about it, it has been quite a few), but several of them have told me that the only available records that were ever documented were being used as a test case now for some similar tragedy. My mind simply won't let me recall...
- GRD: No, I don't imagine.
- MC: ...something else like that, that would be as close as Cincinnati where that many youngsters would be involved. The only thing I could think of was that Supper Club.
- GRD: Well, that perhaps could be it, or maybe there was a single incident involving a single child which would not have made the national headlines quite like the Prestonsburg disaster did.

MC: But now I tried to think, but now the people that told me where the records were said that they were in Cincinnati and they were being used as a test case. I was also told that they would be made available to anyone who wanted to look at them. I don't know where they are in Cincinnati, and that's a big place.

GRD: Well, as I said, I am interested primarily in the music that came out the situation, so I suppose it is not necessary for me to go stirring up bad memories by poking about in the transcript of the trial, or not the trial, but the intended indictment or whatever legal procedure came out of it.

MC: Well, as far as I know, it was just an official inquiry. Because they didn't affix the blame I don't think on any one person but just a culmination of effects, like the tow truck and the slick roads and the icy rain and so on. And then of course, before they did the autopsy on the bus driver, they figured that he may have had a heart attack, but they determined later that he didn't.

GRD: Yes, they certainly checked every angle after the bus was brought out. I know they checked the brake linings, and they were in good condition, and the bus had been checked I believe two days before the accident.

MC: It had been.

GRD: So, it seems as you say that just a combination of many unfortunate things happened all at the wrong time, that was the result. What do you remember about those songs being banned on the radio? You were telling me about that, too. Of course I can't quite imagine anyone in Prestonsburg wanting to play them on the radio, but apparently someone did.

MC: But, they did.

GRD: They did.

MC: They did because I talked to Gorman Collins that owns and manages WDOC in Prestonsburg, and one of his DJs. And I also talked with the young man, I don't know what his name is, at WPRT. But it is up closer to where the bus accident was then, DOC radio is what I call it. They both told me that they had copies of every song that came out. But they were played once, or someone coming in not knowing would play it, and before they had gotten the last child out of the river, those songs were banned. The records were destroyed.

GRD: That was both of the Stanley or should I say...?