

States of the Union

A MODERN PARABLE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



BECAUSE MAN WAS corrupt, God flooded the earth, sparing only Noah and his retinue. But afterward, He seemed regretful. “I will not again curse the earth for man’s sake,” God promised Himself, “for man’s heart is evil from youth. . . .”

The trouble with people is they don’t know what’s good for them. You give them all the moral advantages—storms, floods, ark-making instructions—and what’s the upshot? Backbiting and backsliding, that’s what. So goes the lesson of Genesis VIII; so, too, the lesson of the modern parable, the flood story in reverse that I’m getting ready to tell.

The tale, which unfolded a couple of years ago, begins and ends in Washington, D.C., the nation’s ark production center; but it is mainly about a place called Beauty, a village of 106 families in Eastern Kentucky coal country. To

an outsider passing through, Beauty doesn’t look like much—just a collection of trailers and cottages scattered alongside muddy Buck Creek. To the inhabitants, though, Beauty’s boundaries encompass much that is dear. True, the hazards of living by a temperamental stream can be considerable. Buck Creek in floodtide has washed away its share of lowland houses, and even a few lives. But then the waters recede, the town dries out, life goes on.

Until the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) decided to rescue the town by razing it, the things of Beauty that residents most cherished remained largely unenumerated. Only in their extremity did the citizens grope for a language of civic appreciation. The words then spoken were attempts at self-definition, lending meat-and-potatoes substance to a soufflé of abstractions: Community, stability, social intimacy. The local weekly told its readers they were fighting for the right “to wake up every morning and look at the creek rolling by and say howdy to your neighbor and go about your business.” Bennie Moore told his neighbors, “You know, I have never prayed so long and so hard in my life as I have since I heard what they plan to do to Beauty. Why, this is my

community. I can go to any door in Beauty and eat supper anytime I want to. You can’t buy that with no amount of money.”

In this case, the money that couldn’t buy anything worth having totalled \$2.8 million, a sum HUD had promised to give the Martin County Housing Agency (MCHA) for its exercise in rural removal. To quote from an MCHA memorandum, the Federal funds would buy the “relocation of families out of the Beauty flood plain” and “the development of three new housing sites.” County officials had spent much of 1978 laboring over the plan, getting help from other agencies and from technical consultants, but neglecting to consult anyone with an immediate stake in the project.

Not until January of the following year, in fact, did Beauty residents learn anything about the ark that, unbidden, was heading their way—and then only because the state’s pair of senators in Washington chose that moment to send out a routine press release naming the latest Kentucky towns and counties to be approved for HUD grants. Beauty was right up there in the alphabetical listings.

The news was hard to digest. Could it be true? Were there really such people in government, people prepared to spend nearly \$3 million just to annihilate Beauty? If so, what was behind it? Like Buck Creek, the questions began as a murmur and soon swelled to a fierce commotion. In time, the deluge swept all before it, culminating in a victory that to this day the residents regard as nothing less than miraculous.

The pattern of local response is worth summarizing, for it developed along classic, Saul Alinsky-type lines. In the beginning, there was bewildered acquiescence, a yielding to fate that in all seasons and all contexts characterizes so much of Appalachian life. Next came the murmurs: In February residents organized a committee, the Concerned Citizens of Martin County, and dispatched it to the county housing office in search of more information. The facts somehow proved mysteriously unavailable. Whenever a delegation

from Beauty showed up at MCHA headquarters, officials would desert their offices, files would get lost, copying machines would break down. It soon became apparent that truth was not to know Beauty, nor Beauty truth.

The virtual information blackout imposed by county planners politicized Beauty residents. From quiet skepticism they moved quickly to public protest, cranking out their own press releases and lining up interviews with the local media. In addition, they studied up on the law, a wholly new kind of self-education in Beauty, and one that paid off handsomely. The citizens discovered that county officials were in violation of critical HUD guidelines meant to assure local participation in the proceedings: No announcements had been made, no explanations offered, no hearings held. It began to look as if the housing agency could be beaten on procedural grounds.

In their researches, moreover, Beauty residents thought they could detect a familiar Appalachian scent: The smell of coal. For it seemed likely that behind the flood-rescue scheme lurked the customary absentee interests. It was known, for instance, that at least three coal companies operating in the area were anxious to sink shafts beneath Beauty. It was also known that the Norfolk & Western Railroad, which made most of its money by hauling coal, had been angling for a right-of-way along Buck Creek. In both cases, an abandoned Beauty would smooth the path to profits.

A rumor that Judge Willie Kirk was actively supporting the HUD project did nothing to soften suspicions. Kirk presided over the Fiscal Court that would control condemnation proceedings in Beauty. Convicted in 1963 for embezzlement of Federal funds (when he'd been a county judge-executive), Kirk was pardoned by President Nixon and subsequently re-elected to a county judgeship. But it was his family ties that interested Beauty protestors. His sister-in-law was executive director of the MCHA; his nephew was MCHA board chairman and a planner for the county; his wife was county treasurer. The en-

tire clan was known in those parts as "the housing agency family."

As the protest gained momentum, partisans of the plan bestirred themselves, seeking to defend the turf they hoped to steal. Local officials complained publicly that "outside agitators" in Beauty were creating "confusion and anxiety rather than true participation." The charge contained a grain of truth. The Community Services Administration, a Federal Agency left over from the war against poverty, had contracted with Rural America, Inc., a non-profit association in Washington that I have myself long been associated with, to keep an eye on HUD-sponsored programs like the one being contemplated for Beauty, and make sure citizens had a voice in the planning. Rural America, in turn, had subcontracted with a group called Chase-Options, whose headquarters were a few miles from Beauty, to do monitoring in that region. The "outside agitator" was Joe Szakos, a young man who worked for Chase-Options.

Suddenly both Chase-Options and Rural America were getting phone calls from the Kentucky Congressional delegation, politely inquiring why the two organizations were "interfering" with Beauty's chance to collect \$2.8 million. Considering the adverse publicity to HUD, said one congressman, it seemed unlikely that the agency would ever risk another grant in Eastern Kentucky—which was another way of saying, "I will not again curse the earth for man's sake. . . ." For good measure, a senator's aide wondered out loud if the simplest solution might not be to defund Chase-Options and Rural America.

In the end, sensible heads prevailed. On June 5, HUD sent a "Letter of Disapproval" to the MCHA, citing "numerous citizen complaints" and the county's failure to "provide citizens with an adequate opportunity to articulate needs. . . ." Beauty was saved—until the next scheme or the next flood.

WHAT LESSONS for America flow from these Appalachian springs? To begin with, all of us are implicated in Beauty's struggle, because the residents there

happen to be living atop a huge pile of coal that we as a nation think we need. The Beauty parable can thus be seen as part of a new symbiosis being forged between the nation's metropolitan and rural sectors, whereby rural communities are offered an assortment of benefits in exchange for their resources and skills. How villages negotiate those critical bargains is what the story is all about. In this instance the question turned on the efficacy of local democratic practice in the face of more remote, more powerful interests, or on what the Russian political scientist M.I. Ostrogorski called "the ordeal of self-government."

Self-government was slow to come to Beauty; but upon arrival it proved instantly effective. Indeed, the record suggests that the American democratic experiment still has miles to go before it sleeps, not only at local levels but in national precincts as well. For in the final analysis it was HUD's own citizen-intoxicated guidelines that foiled our villains (whoever they may have been: the coal interests? the railroad? the "housing agency family"?). And it was the U.S. Congress that had written into law a monitoring program meant to keep HUD true to its democratic intentions.

Such useful modes of Federal regulation, to be sure, are out of fashion in this era of neoconservative carelessness; yet they accomplish precisely what the Reagan Administration claims it wants for us all, namely, more choices at the local level. That is what the citizens of Beauty also wanted, and ultimately got, rather than the top-down philanthropy they were initially offered.

Finally, Beauty's refusal to get on board HUD's questionable ark represents a hopeful change in traditional attitudes. Certainly the people there differ from their parents and grandparents, who cheerfully gave up the minerals beneath their land in exchange for paltry money orders mailed from Wheeling and Pittsburgh. In Appalachia, a little money can look like a lot, which is why the Beautys of America are so often tempted to play Esau to an urban Jacob.