

Kerrs Creek  
Myra Stuples  
Surviving Hurricane Camille On A Hay Bale--1969  
By Sarah Clayton

Across Rt. 60 from Kerrs Creek Baptist Church, on a hill higher than the flood waters have ever reached, lives Myra Jean Rion Stuples, who, as a seven year old, rode out the flood waters of Hurricane Camille, on a hay bale. The rest of her family—mother, father and two-year-old brother, Nolan—didn't make it. This is her story as told to me 50 years later:

“It was a Tuesday, August 19, 1969,” she begins with a deep intake of breath, eyes staring. “And I remember that mom (her mother was a Hostetter from the west side of Big House Mountain) and I had mowed grass that day. Well...she mowed. I just followed along behind. Our house was on River Road near Glasgow. We watched the Arthur Smith show on TV, then mom put me to bed. Suddenly it was chaos. They were waking me up. Waking my brother up. My dad had come home and said the river was rising, and we ought to get out.

He couldn't get the truck started, and the water was already over the road. We decided to go to the neighbors' house because theirs was two-story and set back. But it wasn't long before the water come up, and we moved into a barn in the fields....Then the water started coming in there, too. So we went to another barn farther back. We got upstairs in the hay loft, and I must have fallen asleep. I remember waking up and the barn was collapsing, and it was going around and around and around in circles, like water in a drain. After that, we're all in the water and going down the river. I remember being under water and back on top and back under, and then I came across my Dad.

He was holding onto a tree and he grabbed me as I went by and held onto me, and then told me he couldn't hold me much longer because he was getting tired. A bale of hay come through and he grabbed it. He told me to hold onto that bale and it would get me to somewhere safe.

“But, as I was going down the river, the bale just fell apart, and I remember going back under. I remember rocks and logs hitting me in the head, hitting me in the body, and then somehow I wound up where the old metal bridge was in Glasgow. I was standing on a piece of plywood bobbin' up and down in the water.” Her hand makes a rocking motion. “It must have been that the rocks and logs had built up and made a pool. I hollered for help but figured no one could hear me with the water and everything. I was scared to death. I was a seven-year-old kid. I mean, I didn't know what was going to happen next, or if anyone would ever find me, or what was going on. Then some guys come out with a boat but they couldn't get to me. The guy in the boat had to jump out and swim over, then swim back with me. They took me to the hospital, and I remember an older lady helping me take a bath, and someone went out to a shop on Main Street in Lexington and bought me a dress. I still have it.”

She holds it up. It's starched and pressed, and so very small.

“They found my dad at the iron bridge there in Glasgow. They found my mom where that dam is going toward Bedford. She made it to the James River. They never found my brother.

“I went to live with an aunt who had a daughter a year or so younger than I was, and we were just like sisters. But I never felt like I fitted in. The memory haunts me all the time. I dream about it. Sometimes I'm in James Lees (the carpet factory in

Glasgow). It's Mohawk now. I've never worked there but people told me about the water coming in and in my dream I'm inside or on the roof with the water rising and I'm trying to get out. I dream of being in the water. I feel like I can never be really happy. I mean, if I have a little bit of happiness, I'm waiting for the next destructive thing to happen. I can't go out and enjoy myself because I feel like I'll have to pay for it somewhere.

"When I was growing up, my grandma used to show me off to everybody—'this is the one that survived'—like I was some kind of hero. I didn't do nothing to save myself. I was not some kind of hero. The Lord survived me.

"My children didn't even know (her survival story) until a few years ago. They found a magazine in my closet. I was just as happy if we went on and didn't talk about it."

She does remember a happy childhood before the flood, when she and her mother were always together, her mother teaching her to cook and sew and iron.

"Momma and me was like that," she says, winding two fingers around each other. "And, Dad, he worked on cars and, at the time of the flood, he was working at the Locher Brick Company, and I remember going there with him, and sometimes he'd stop by a gas station and he'd always bring me back malted milk duds. Any time he called the house, he had to speak to me. He was a big man. Could do anything. I lived in a happy home.

"I got married a week before I turned 17. I was pregnant with Donna, that's Jennarae's mother."

Jennarae?! The name hits me like a ton of stone. Jennarae! That was the little girl who'd been killed a year ago, running onto Rt. 60 after her dog, Cash. The 12-year-old who'd hunted bears, and drove her granddaddy Tim Goodbar's big logging trucks. I'd met her when she was about 9, tearing around her granddaddy's yard in Taylor Hollow on a four-wheeler with her younger brother, Nathan. And remember thinking how refreshing it was to see children outside playing.

"She's somethin', that one," Granddaddy Tim had told me at that time. We were sitting on his patio, watching the children; they were arguing over who's turn it was to drive the four-wheeler. "Killed her first bear when she was 11."

"Donna called and told me 'Jennarae's been hit by a car,'" says Myra. "But I had no idea that it was just down the road, and she was already dead. They were still working on her when I got there. But, as soon as I walked up, I knew she was gone.

"I think God took her for a reason. She was developing into a beautiful young lady. With this black market stuff of people stealing children and selling them. That was my big fear for her. She was so outgoing. Never met a stranger. I was so afraid someone was going to take her. And I don't think she could have handled something like that.

"I sat by Jenna's head and was cleaning the leaves and gravel out of her hair. I found three bobby pins, and I kept 'em. Donna cleaned one side of her face and I cleaned the other while everybody come by and kissed her goodbye. It started to rain." Myra sits quietly, the little dress across her lap. Another long pause. "I think, when the rain started, God took her."

But now, realizing Myra is Jennarae's Grandmother, I wonder how Myra, with the trauma of her childhood, is surviving this second, double-barreled blow in life. How much sorrow can one person absorb before they fall apart and leak away. Like the hay bale.

"You just go on," says Myra. She and her husband, Wayne, the man she married at 16, recently celebrated 42 years of marriage. Their home is filled to overflowing with the accretion of their life together, all arranged to cozy effect. Comfortable furniture. Pictures of pastoral scenes. Artificial flower arrangements. One room is filled with everything related to the Pillsbury Doughboy—plates, clocks, dolls, posters. Another is a shrine to Jennarae—pictures, clothes, her backpack, and the shoes she had on when she died. Myra puts her flood of sorrow into adding to this room and making memorials for the grave in the Kerrs Creek Baptist Church Cemetery where Jennarae and Cash are buried together, House Mountain looming over all, like a benevolent God.