

Gauley Bridge, West Virginia Encyclopedia Article

Gauley Bridge, West Virginia

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Gauley Bridge, West Virginia Encyclopedia Article.....	1
Contents.....	2
Gauley Bridge, West Virginia.....	3



Gauley Bridge, West Virginia

Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, was the scene of a landmark case of environmental racism—one involving a conflict between the powerful and the powerless, between African-Americans and whites in 1930 to 1931. A contracting company, Rinehart and Dennis, recruited nonunion workers from the Deep South to drill the three-mile Hawk's Nest Tunnel through Gauley Mountain. The tunnel diverts the New River through giant turbines owned by Union Carbide to power Electro-Metallurgical Company, a producer of ferrosilicon.

Gauley Mountain consists of sandstone rich in silica. African-American migrants constituted 75 percent of the fifteen hundred workers employed to drill the tunnel. Supervised by armed white foremen, workers tunneled without the protection of respirators, dust suppressors, or mine ventilators. The workers—in six-day, ten-hour shifts—lived in a life-threatening environment.

By 1933 the contractor and Union Carbide faced over five hundred lawsuits. The plaintiffs claimed exposure to the risk of acute silicosis leading to lung damage, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. Because of worker transience, the number of deaths and disabilities occurring at Gauley Bridge remains unknown. An out-of-court settlement included the dispossession of plaintiffs' evidence. In *The Hawk's Nest Incident*, Martin Cherniak writes, "The death rate of black males nineteen and older in Fayette County from 1930 to 1935 exceeded the rate [for three similar mining counties] by 51 percent, although it was almost identical from 1928 to 1930" (p. 100). An estimated 764 workers died from silicosis.

The tragic Gauley Bridge episode led all but two states to amend worker compensation laws to include silica as a hazard that could be compensated. The struggle by people of color to avoid exposure to toxic materials, however, continues. Police arrested Washington D.C.–congressional delegate Walter Fauntroy, leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and four hundred others in 1982. They protested North Carolina's decision to use Afton, an African-American community, as the final resting place for 3,200 cubic yards of soil contaminated by polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). For the protestors, the decision to put the PCBs in Afton was a racially discriminatory action that they suspected to be common nationwide.

Bibliography

Bullard, Robert D. (1994). *Dumping in Dixie*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Cherniak, Martin. (1986). *The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Disaster*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Humphrey, Craig R.; Lewis, Tammy L.; and Buttel, Frederick H. (2002). *Environment, Energy, and Society: A New Synthesis*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.