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Anjean Road: Remembering Delmas And Rita Parsons, Nellie Hinkle On Anniversary Of Flood

By Ashley Adkins

After starting a new family, Daniel and Katie Parsons made the decision to move closer to their parents so their two boys, just babies at the time, could be raised around their grandparents. They never could have imagined how important that decision would be or how profoundly it would affect their lives.

The Parsons found a home on Anjean Road in Rupert, only a mile away from Daniel Parsons' parents, Delmas and Rita Parsons. Just as they had hoped, their sons grew to each form a special bond with their grandparents – forged from countless hours of hunting in the woods with their grandpa and eating hearty meals of their grandma's biscuits and venison.

"They miss that a lot," reflected Katie Parsons after describing the day that washed away all but the memories of those precious days.

Cody and Devin Parsons were 18 and 16, respectively, when the rain started falling on June 23, 2016. While Katie

Parsons was away from home at work for the Committee on Aging, her husband received a call from his parents informing him that it was flooding and that the bridge had just washed away. By then, she explained, so many areas on Anjean Road were so flooded that no one could pass – but her in-laws told their son they were going to be OK.

"They said they had called for help, and help was on the way, but if need be, they were just going to move higher up on the mountain," Katie Parsons recalled. "That's the last my husband heard from them."

Moments after the call, their phones stopped working, and, choosing to hold on to hope, Katie and Daniel Parsons believed their family would be rescued or somehow make it to safety.

Help was certainly on the way, but no one made it in time.

James Dunn, a friend of Delmas Parsons, had made it across the bridge before it collapsed and was in the process of pushing through water that

was already waist-deep to reach his friends when he saw it – a wall of water rushing off the mountain with such speed and force that many who witnessed it simply say it was like "something you see in a movie."

Helpless to do anything else, Dunn climbed a tree – a tree where he would spend the next several hours watching as the flood waters ripped through houses, structures and every other tree on the property. The first trailer struck by that wall belonged to Nellie Hinkle, who was alone in her home when the waters crashed into her trailer and swept it into the home of her son, Doug Hinkle, who was fortunately not at home. Unrelenting, the torrent knocked Doug Hinkle's trailer loose and sent it crashing into the home of Delmas and Rita Parsons.

No one would find Nellie Hinkle or Delmas Parsons until Friday, June 24. Rita Parsons wouldn't be found until Saturday.

"It was my two sons, my husband, brother-in-law and friends and family

that did a lot of the searching in the river," Katie Parsons lamented. "My husband and brother-in-law were looking for their parents and my kids for their grandparents ... up to their necks in that dirty flood water, moving debris."

Though she said her boys saw only a glimpse of their grandfather when they found him in the river Friday morning, Katie Parsons said it was enough.

"My father-in-law was found with his hands gripped out like he was holding on to something," Katie Parsons recalled, demonstrating the position in which Delmas Parsons' body was found. "My husband and boys saw that."

"Rita was found about a half or three-quarters of a mile away from the house on Saturday; she was actually found up inside of a tree with all kinds of brush. It was horrible," Katie Parsons added. "I think that's what affected my husband and the kids the most – know-

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Flood Anniversary

ing how they died, how they suffered so terribly."

It wasn't until Friday afternoon that Katie Parsons was able to return to her own home and join her family as they mourned. When she received a call from her husband that they had found his father's body in the river, she was stranded on the other side of Rupert – ironically with the wife of the man who had attempted to save her family. The way into Rupert had flooded, and the National Guard had arrived to evacuate survivors, but they weren't letting anyone into the town – or so they thought.

"When I saw the first truck crossing into the water, I thought, 'Oh my God, that's my way in,'" Katie Parsons recalled. "By then, we knew they had both disappeared and were probably dead; my family is freaking out and searching the river, and I'm stuck on the outside."

When the first National Guard truck came back across the water from inside Rupert, they were carrying two bodies. Though she didn't know it at the time, Katie Parsons believes now they were

the bodies of her father-in-law and Nellie Hinkle.

Determined to make it to her family, Katie Parsons approached the soldiers before they returned to Rupert and asked to be taken across to her family. Despite explaining who she was and that she had just learned one of her family members was killed in the flood, the soldiers refused to take her into the flood-ravaged town.

"If you do not let me get on this truck and let me cross over with you, I will swim my butt across that dirty, bacteria water, and it'll be on your hands to save my life if something happens because I'm going regardless," Katie Parsons said she told the Guard. "They ended up letting me go."

Once safely back in Rupert, Katie Parsons joined her family and learned the grisly details of what occurred on that tragic day. She also learned of the bravery of her two sons in the midst of the flood.

"Our house didn't get flooded on Anjean, but so many people around us

were devastated," Katie Parsons noted. "Our neighbor below us is a paraplegic, and if it hadn't been for my boys going down and carrying her upstairs, she would have drowned to death. They also took her food throughout the night."

Three weeks after the flood, the Parsons family observed the passing of what would have been Delmas Parsons' 71st birthday on July 13. Rita Parsons was 67 when the flood took her life.

Though the flood cut their years short, the deep bonds that make this tragedy even harder to bear are evidence that those years were well spent.

Tonight, the Parsons will attend the candlelight remembrance service in Rainelle to honor and remember their family and all those who lost their lives that day.

Katie Parsons said she was deeply saddened when she learned that Nellie Hinkle had been alone in her home during the flood.

"At least my in-laws had each other," Katie Parsons said. "But I hate that

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poor Nellie Hinkle was alone by herself."

As other survivors celebrate the building of new homes and the revitalization of their communities, the Parsons are still looking for the property their parents once called home to be cleared of debris. They had hoped, Katie Parsons said, the land would be cleared in time for the anniversary of the flood so that their family could build a small memorial on the land and hold their own service for Delmas and Rita Parsons.

When the National Guard does come to clear the debris, however, Katie Parsons said she has made it clear to them that they are not to lay a hand on the tree that saved the life of James Dunn that day.

"He climbed the only tree that survived on the property – it's the original tree that's been there for probably 100 years," Katie Parsons explained. "We told the National Guard, 'When you come up to clean, don't you dare touch that tree. It's to stay.'"