



In this Getty Images photo by Jim Gray, rescue workers continue their search for victims of the 1966 Aberfan disaster, in South Wales, where 144 people — 116 of them schoolchildren — lost their lives after part of the village school was engulfed by a giant coal slag heap. Below right, this Life magazine photo shows the disaster's path of destruction.

"I had to bear being able to play a chord and have it hurt my heart, I couldn't move from that chord until I felt that, and the combination of physical pain, the event and the chord, were all together in the experience."

Laura Siersema
Greenfield composer, musician and singer

'Aberfan'

One woman's elegy for a Welsh village's young disaster victims

Story by **Richie Davis**

Heavy rains had fallen for days on Aberfan, in the Mether Vale district of Wales, in late October 1966. But they'd stopped by the time the young schoolchildren from around the mining village walked to Pantglas Junior School the morning of Friday, Oct. 21.

By 9:15, the pupils — the boys in their gray, short trousers, the girls in their uniform dresses and cardigans — had finished the school's morning meeting, where all had joined in singing "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

Then an avalanche of water-soaked slurry from "Tip No. 7," a pile of debris from the coal mine, broke loose and raced down the mountain like a locomotive, demolishing Hafod Tanglwys mountainside farm, killing one adult and three children there. It buried the school and 20 houses in its path.

On the last day before their half-term vacation, 116 schoolchildren ages 7 to 10, along with 28 adults, including five teachers — 144 victims in all — were instantly smothered

by half a million tons of coal waste in what South Wales Police describes as a tidal wave 40 feet high.

"In the small Welsh town of Aberfan, for days the rain did fall,

Down on the heart of Aberfan, the mountain began to crawl.

The little children of Aberfan were in their school that day,

When the big cold mountain above them high,

Began to rumble and sway."

Greenfield singer-songwriter Laura Siersema remembers hearing her mother singing an original folk song when Siersema was a girl in the hills of rural western Virginia, one of many songs her family grew up with from their parents' folk-music group. Called "The Han-o-lees, it featured their father on string bass and mother singing and playing piano.

The Aberfan Disaster, called the worst coal-mining accident in the history of Wales, had occurred just a

See **ABERFAN** Page D3

