Participation Type
Panel

Session Title
Reflections on the New River

Session Abstract or Summary
Drawn from an anthology of essays and poems focusing on the New River and the communities along its banks, the panel session Reflections on the New River uses research and recollections to explore the communities along the river in Giles County, Virginia; the history and ghost towns lining West Virginia’s New River Gorge; and the story of the Dries, Hawks Nest Tunnel and the industrial disaster that created them. The topics include political wrangling over road improvements; murders along the Appalachian Trail; a five-person town and 100-foot pools; coal trains, rafts, people leaping from a bridge 876 feet above the river and secretive nighttime burials in a family cornfield.

Timothy W. Thornton, Virginia Western Community College and Ferrum College
Cat Pleska, Marshall University and Arizona State
Caroline Kane Kenna, Independent scholar

Except in Whispers

Presentation #1 Abstract or Summary
At the Dries, the New River virtually disappears, stopped by a dam and diverted through a tunnel under Gauley Mountain to a power plant downstream. The effect on the river is dramatic, but the suffering of the men who built the tunnel was greater still hundreds of men – mostly African Americans, along with some migrants and some locals – died in the tunnel or because of it. Many were buried in unmarked graves. Some of those bodies were recovered (when they were in the path of a highway) and now rest in a plot with a marker commemorating them and the industrial disaster that killed them.

At-A-Glance Bio- Presenter #1
Tim Thornton is a writer, journalist, and teacher with experience at mainstream and alternative newspapers and magazines, on public radio, and online. He has won national awards for environmental reporting, the Phillip D. Reed Memorial Award for Outstanding Writing on the Southern Environment, the Virginia Press Association’s D. Lathan Mims Award for “editorial leadership and service to the community,” and ribbons for his dulcimer playing. He teaches at Ferrum College and Virginia Western Community College.

Presentation #2 Title
Wild and Wonderful

Presentation #2 Abstract or Summary
Cat Pleska’s essay contrasts the power and the permanence of the New River with the transitory nature of the lives and the human endeavors along its banks. While the industry and community and festivity that goes on along and in the river rises and falls like a tide, the river courses steadily on.

At-A-Glance Bio- Presenter #2
Cat Pleska is a seventh generation West Virginian. She teaches personal writing/Appalachian culture at Marshall University Graduate College and liberal studies
Presentation #3 Title
Between the Bridges

Presentation #3 Abstract or Summary
Caroline Kane Kenna’s father, a lawyer turned journalist, came to Giles County in 1959 and eventually came to own and run the county’s weekly newspaper, the Virginia-Leader. Between the Bridges is about community, family, journalism, and the river that cuts what Kenna calls “a 37-mile drunkard’s path” through Giles County.

At-A-Glance Bio- Presenter #3
Caroline Kane Kenna has been a reporter for newspapers including the Virginia-Leader, The Star-Exponent and the Culpeper News. She earned a B.A. in history from King College and a B.A in journalism from Memphis State University. Her poetry has been published in the anthology Above the Fold. She is a member of the Charlotte Writers’ Club and a poetry performance group.