

The tennessee valley authority history essay



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When it was established in 1933, the Tennessee Valley Authority was an extremely controversial organization. As part of Roosevelt's New Deal and his first hundred days, in which he initiated many new programs to jump start the nation's economy and put people back to work, the TVA was charged with the responsibility of providing electricity, improving infrastructure, and enhancing the quality of life of the deeply depressed people living in the Tennessee Valley. During the Great Depression, those populating this area resided in log cabins, with only the bare essentials needed to survive, and sometimes less. Their objectives of electrifying rural America came into direct conflict with the capitalistic ambitions of private utility companies. Also, in order to accomplish their goals of improving the Tennessee Valley's waterways for transportation meant building dams and man-made lakes, displacing thousands of locals who had inhabited the area for hundreds of years. This operation not only involved relocating families to their new homes, which was met with an exceptional amount of resistance, but exhuming the thousands of graves and reburial of them at new sites. However, although the work done by the TVA in this area was sometimes flawed, and hated by many people in which the program aimed to help, the organization helped to bring modern commodities to a region that had been devastated by the economic crisis of the Great Depression.

The Tennessee Valley During the Depression

The area surrounding the prospective site for Norris Dam had been settled for the past two hundred years and, like much of America's farmland further west, the land showed signs of exhaustion by farmers who did not consider the long term effects of over farming. Prior to the Depression, many young

men and women from the Tennessee Valley would move away from the area to their own farms or to new cities of an increasingly industrialized Midwest. However, when tough economic times hit the American people during the Great Depression, many of those who had left to begin their own lives returned home to the safety and the familiar surroundings of their Tennessee homes. In the years between 1930 and 1935, the Tennessee Valley saw an increase in the area's population, which made living off what little the land provided even more difficult than before.

Farmers in the Tennessee Valley primarily raised corn for their animals and livestock while raising other crops for personal consumption. Tobacco was also raised to bring in a source of revenue, providing farmers with something they could sell in order to buy things they could not make or grow at home. Farming primarily for one's own personal use, called subsistence farming, was a way of life in the Tennessee Valley which allowed for very few luxuries to the people which lived there. The 3500 farming families in the area which would be flooded by the Norris Dam included both property owners and tenant farmers, or farmers who grew cash crops like tobacco on another person's land in exchange for a place to live. Living conditions in the Tennessee Valley were extremely difficult for both of these groups. Even during the most prosperous of times, there was not nearly enough money gained by way of local taxes to provide for adequate public schools, health services, or road construction.

Founding of the Tennessee Valley Authority

One of the TVA's primary objectives was to improve infrastructure and the ability to transport goods through the Tennessee Valley through the use of

its rivers and other waterways. This was particularly the case with an area of the Tennessee valley known as Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where the Tennessee River drops 140 feet in elevation over about thirty miles. This dramatic drop in altitude produced the rapids or “ shoals” that the area received its named for, and made it extremely difficult for ships to go through and further up the Tennessee River. In 1916 the federal government gained ownership of the region and began drawing up plans to construct a dam there. The dam was intended to produce electricity which was needed to manufacture explosives for the war effort. However, World War I ended before the facilities could be completed and utilized. During the next few years, the government debated over what should be done with the area. Some members of Congress argued that the dam should be sold to private organizations. At one point, Henry Ford put in an offer to purchase the land in order to develop a nitrate plant in the area.

Senator George W. Norris from Nebraska, on the other hand, argued that the public should retain control over the area. Norris had attempted several times to initiate bills for the federal development of the region. However, they were all defeated by Republican administrations who saw no advantages to retaining the area. With the onset of the Great Depression, Americans viewed government economic intervention in the public interest much more favorably. The newly elected President Roosevelt, who had a previous interest in regional planning, conservation, and planning, supported Norris’ proposal to develop the Tennessee River Valley.

On May 18, 1933 Roosevelt signed the Tennessee Valley Authority Act as part of his first 100 days. The objectives of the TVA was to improve

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transportation along the Tennessee River, provide methods for flood control, plan reforestation, improve the quality of the poor farm lands, assist in agricultural and industrial development, and aid in the national defense effort with the development of government owned nitrate and phosphorus manufacturing facilities at Muscle Shoals. The Tennessee River ran through seven states and through some of the most depressed and disadvantaged areas in the South.

Although almost ninety percent of those living in urban areas had electricity by the 1930s, this was only true for ten percent of people living in rural areas. Private electricity companies, who were the primary suppliers of electric power to the nation's consumers, insisted that it would be too expensive to build electric lines to small, isolated rural farmsteads. They also argued that most farmers would not even be able to afford electricity in the event that they were provided the opportunity.

Roosevelt and his administration held the belief that if private electricity companies could not or would not supply electric power to the American people, then it was the responsibility of the federal government to do it. In 1935, the Rural Electric Administration was established to electrify rural areas such as the Tennessee Valley. In his 1935 article "Electrifying the Countryside," the head of the REA, Morris Cooke, stated that:

In addition to paying for the energy he used, the farmer was expected to advance to the power company most or all of the costs of construction. Since utility company ideas as to what constituted sound rural lines have been rather fancy, such costs were prohibitive for most farmers.

By the start of 1939 the REA had assisted in establishing several hundred rural electric cooperatives, which provided services to about 300, 000 homes. Rural households with electricity had risen to twenty-five percent. Furthermore, the acts of the REA motivated private power companies to provide electricity to the countryside as well. When farmers did finally receive electric power, they helped to support local merchants by purchasing electric appliances. As it turned out, farmers generally required more energy than those living in the city, which helped to balance the extra expenses on the part of the electric companies in bringing power lines to the rural areas.

The Tennessee Valley Authority established the Electric Home and Farm Authority to assist farmers in purchasing major electric appliances. The EHFA made special arrangements with appliance manufacturers to provide electric ranges, water heaters, and refrigerators at prices most farmers could afford. The new appliances were sold at local electric cooperatives and utility companies. It was here that a farmer could purchase appliances with loans offered by the EHFA, who provided these loans with low-cost financing.

Electrification of rural land was based on the idea that affordable electricity would help to improve the standard of life and the economic independence of the traditional family farm. But electricity alone was not nearly enough to put a stop to the hardships being faced by America's farm communities. Furthermore, it did not stop the migration of rural farmers from the country to the city, or did it stop the shrinking of the total number of family owned farms.

Opposition to the TVA

There were many people who opposed the TVA and the federal government's participation in developing electric power in rural areas, in particular utility companies who thought that the government had an unfair advantage when competing with private companies. Also, some members of the Congress who didn't believe the government should have the right to influence the economy, thought that the TVA was a potentially dangerous program which would bring the United States just that much closer to socialism. Others believed that rural farmers did not have the knowledge or skills needed to maintain and support local electric companies.

The most powerful opposition to the Tennessee Valley Authority came from power companies, who found it hard to compete with the cheaper energy provided through the TVA, and they saw it as a danger to private development. They argued that the federal government's participation in the electricity industry was unconstitutional. The attack on the TVA was led by future presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, then president of the large power utility company Commonwealth & Southern Company.

During the 1930s, many court cases were brought against the TVA. The Alabama Power Company presented a lawsuit against the TVA that made it all the way to the Supreme Court. They argued that by entering into the electricity industry, the federal government had surpassed its Constitutional powers. However, these attempts proved unsuccessful. In February of 1936, the Supreme Court came to the decision that the TVA had the right and authority to produce power at Wilson Dam as well as to sell and distribute

that electricity. In 1939 the Court again maintained the constitutionality of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Consequences of the TVA

The TVA was established in part to improve the standard of living in an region which was home to three-and-a-half million people. When Norris Dam was built it flooded an area of 239 square acres where about 3, 500 families resided. Section 2, Paragraph (h) of the Act establishing the TVA gave it the authority “ to exercise the right of eminent domain, and in the purchase of any real estate or the condemnation of real estate by condemnation proceedings, the title to such real estate.”

Even though the TVA had been established for the purpose of improving the living conditions of the people living in the Tennessee Valley, the federal government neglected to offer much of any assistance in resettling the displaced families of the Norris Basin. In this area, farm owners were supplied with cash settlements for their property and were given help in the search for a new home. Tenants, who merely worked on the land but did not own it, received no payment at all. The Norris Basin had been home for thousands of families for centuries. Generations of people had been buried there. In addition to relocating all of the areas living population, all of the region’s dead had to be exhumed from their graves and reburied in places outside the reach of the lakes created by the Norris dam. For both the farm families and the TVA workers alike, this process was extremely difficult.

Some of the families displaced by the Norris Dam benefited from the work of the TVA. Many people saw that their new homes were nicer and more

comfortable than their old log cabin ones. Additionally, approximately one in five had a family member who was employed by the TVA. However, sixty percent of the relocated families were moved to new homes within the five counties that made up the Norris Basin, which, even after the efforts of the TVA, continued to be a region that suffered from the same problems of poor farming conditions and overcrowding and that had been a source of trouble from them prior.

Similarly to other planned communities developed during FDR's New Deal, the small town of Norris was initially supposed to be a great display for the electrification of rural America and city planning. Many people believed that Norris would be the perfect home for those displaced people from the Norris Basin. However, the construction workers who came to the area in order to build the Norris Dam also needed a place to stay. Because of this, Norris originally functioned as temporary housing for the TVA workers and their families, while the residents of the Norris Basin were forced to find other accommodations, often times in areas just as poverty-stricken as where they had come from.

The idea that Norris would become a model American town was a mistaken one from the start. TVA authorities made regulations excluding African-American families from living in the town. They argued that these measures were taken in order to conform to the traditions and customs of the region. However, black leaders were quick to point out that impoverished white and black families had lived and worked together in the mountains and valleys of the basin for many years prior to the arrival of the TVA. During the 1930s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People coordinated

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three separate investigations of Tennessee Valley Authority for racial discrimination in the housing and hiring of African-Americans.

A man named Arthur Morgan, who was very interested in community planning, imagined Norris as a self-sustaining community of people who involved themselves in small, local cooperative industries. Early in the development of Norris, some cooperative businesses were established. These included canneries, creameries, and poultry farms. The community's public school became a focal point of community activity. Educational classes were given to children as well as adults, and for the town people themselves and for the farming families from the surrounding communities. However, despite Morgan's ambition and noble goals for the town, living in Norris was operated much like any other company town. The TVA managed almost every aspect of activity in Norris. Everything from the town's gas station to its cafeteria was operated by the TVA.

When the dam was finished, the construction workers left Norris. Working professionals who were employed by TVA or in nearby Knoxville saw Norris as a practical alternative to life in the city, and the town slowly transformed into a white collar suburb of Knoxville. As the town's inhabitants became more affluent, and were required to travel to jobs which were outside of Norris, the cooperative organizations and many of the community driven activities diminished. In 1948, the government sold the town to a private corporation, who in turn resold the individual lots to the residents.