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THE TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY

Its History

by

Judy Crumby

for

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Social Science

In 1912 George William Norris was elected to the United States Senate. This might properly be called the beginning of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Sen. Norris became an outspoken advocate of public ownership of public utilities. His greatest dream was the development by the government of the possibilities for electric power in the Tennessee River Valley. Finally in 1933, Norris was able to see his dream fulfilled. His bill for the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority was passed, and then three years later, a great dam was completed and named in honor of Norris.

There was a very definite need for the TVA. It was brought about by our very own shortsightedness, greed, and stupidity. For the first hundred years of the life of the United States, we had an unlimited supply of natural resources. All the while we also had a widespread waste of them. Our seemingly limitless forests were considered as barriers to be done away with in order to clear farm land and find mineral riches -- in our greediness to find a short cut to wealth. The final result of this massacre was disaster. Formerly the roots of shrubs and trees served to hold the soil, but when the forests began disappearing, the land was washed away also. Winds also carried away the soil and the land gradually became useless for farming. The rivers began producing greater and more destructive floods and there was much loss of life and property. One of the regions that suffered most was the area surrounding the Tennessee River and its branches.

Sen. Norris's bill calling for the creation of the TVA received the vigorous support of then President Franklin Roosevelt. It was included in the New Deal program to help America make the most of its natural and economic resources. Its purpose was to start a wide and continuous development of the resources in the Tennessee Valley. This was to be done by building dams to control floods, and deep-ening the rivers for shipping, and by creating electric power for the valley area. Also new forests were to be planted while a program was started to save the ones that were already there. A research project was started to develop cheap yet effective soil fertilizers. The encouragement of farmers and manufacturers to take advantage of the natural resources of the Tennessee Valley was started. Also at the same time the power and minerals developed by the TVA was planned by Congress as part of our national defense in case the suspected war took place.¹

The Tennessee Valley is an area of about 40, 910 square miles. It includes parts of seven states, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. The type of land varies all the way from mile-high peaks of the great Smoky Mountains to the low muddy plains near the mouth of the Tennessee River.

The Tennessee Valley Authority program benefits more than just this immediate area. The electricity from the TVA dams

¹Link, Arthur, & Muzzey, David, OUR AMERICAN REPRESENTATIVE, (Boston, Ginn. & Co. (1963), p. 576.

supply homes, farms, stores, mines, and factories over an increased area of about 80,000 square miles. The fertilizer project developed and improved on phosphate fertilizers that are tested and demonstrated under the diffection of land-grant colleges in more than half of the states of the Union. Thus the TVA indirectly benefits the whole nation. The Tennessee Valley is extremely rich in natural resources. It produces vast amounts of coal, copper, iron, manganese, marble, and zinc. It also produces limestone, sand, and gravel.

The TVA was established after fifteen years of Congressional debate over what was going to happen to the government nitrate plant and Wilson Dam and Muscle Shoals, Alabama. According to Mr. Stuart Chase, in his book THE ECONOMY OF ABUNDANCE, the projects were built under the National Defense Act of 1916, but they had not been built in time for World War I. The TVA Act transferred both of these from the War Department to the TVA.

There was a great deal of departmental jealousy over this new change in national policy. Always before the responsibility for the various projects in the valley had been divided among the involved departments. For example, the Department of Agriculture had been responsible for the development of agriculture there. Forest conservation had been the responsibility of the Department of Interior, etc. But after the TVA Act, it became directed by a three-man board, who were appointed at three-year intervals for terms of nine years each. These three

men are responsible to the Congress and the President. Thus the TVA Act was an enlightened realization that all conservation problems are related and placed the entire problem in the hands of one agency the responsibility of which is the advancement in all fields of the conservation and development of resources.

Of course there is a conservative element in the government who oppose this program. Republican Senator Francis Chase explained his opposition in an article in the SATURDAY EVENING POST, entitled "How One Senator Explains His Vote To Folks At Home", partially by stating that the entire TVA Act is merely causing for more tax money to be spent duplicating the same functions of individual departments.

There are two general types of dams on the Tennessee River and its branches. On the main stream of the Tennessee River, long dams were built, which made a continuous chain of lakes from Paducah, Kentucky to Knoxville, Tennessee. Each of these dams has a lock by which towboats and barges may be raised or lowered from one lake level to another. On the branches of the Tennessee, high dams create great water res-ervoirs between the hills and mountains. These dams have made this river system one of the most completely controlled in the world.

On the Tennessee River are the Kentucky, Pickwick Landing, Wilson, Wheeler, Gunterville, Hales Bar, Chickamauga, Watts Bar, and Fort Loudoun dams. The largest of these dams is the Kentucky Dam. It is one and a half miles long and 206 feet

high. It creates a 184 mile long lake.

On the branches of the Tennessee are Norris Dam on the Clinch River, Cherokee Dam on the Holston, South Holston Dam on the South Fork of the Holston, Douglas Dam on the French Broad, Fontana, Chalderwood, and Cheoah Dams on the Little Tennessee, Appalachia, Hiwassee, and Chatuge Dams on the Hiwassee, Nottely Dam on the Nottely, Ocee Dams # 1, 2, and 3 on the Ocoee, Blue Ridge Dam on the Toccoa, Great Falls Dam on the Caney Fork, a branch of the Cumberland River, Nolichucky, on the Nolichucky, Watauga and Wilbur on the Watauga, Santeetlah on the Cheoah, Glenville on the West Fork of the Tuckasegee, and Nantahala on the Nantahala.²

Under an agreement with the Aluminum Corporation of America, The TVA also operates five major dams which belong to it as part of the government system.

The electric-power of the TVA has increased ten times from 1933 until 1951. By 1951 the system had a capacity of about sixteen billion kilowatt-hours compared with one and a half billion in 1933. The time of greatest expansion was during the years of World War II. War production consumed about three fourths of the electrical^{1,2,3,4} produced during the war years. Now the TVA power is mostly consumed by the atomic energy plant at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. In 1955 the TVA opened a giant steam plant near the Oak Ridge laboratories of the Atomic Energy Commission. Then in 1956 Governor Frank G. Clement dedicated a \$6,000,000

²"Tennessee Valley Authority," WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA, vol. 16, pp. 7967 - 7968.

University of Tennessee Hospital and Research Center in Knoxville. It is equipped to use radioisotopes from the Oak Ridge atomic-energy laboratories for research work. At the same time construction was started on three more generating units at steam plants of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

The amount of freight carried on the Tennessee River was significantly increased with the improvement of the river channel. This channel connects with the inland waterway system of the United States, and provides a 630 mile navigation route for boats that are of nine-foot draft. These barge lines transport a great variety of farm, factory, mine, and quarry products.

Control of the waters of the Tennessee River and its branches constitute one of the major functions of the Tennessee Valley Authority. This control has reduced flood damage by many millions of dollars. The reservoirs behind the dams are required to be at a certain low level at the beginning of each major flood season which is usually around the first of January. This provides storage for more than eleven million acre-feet of water. Then when the dry season begins in late summer, the stored water is released to generate power.

The nitrate plant at Muscle Shoals manufactures ammonium nitrate for explosives and for fertilizer, elemental phosphorous, calcium carbide for making synthetic rubber, and phosphate fertilizers.

By 1955 more than two hundred million seedling trees had

been planted on eroded lands in soil and forest conservation projects. Also the TVA forestry experts promote selective cutting and greater fire protection to conserve and increase the region's forest resources. More than half of the acreage of the Tennessee Valley are covered with forests and farm wood lots.

Even the recreational outlook of the Tennessee Valley has been changed by the Tennessee Valley Authority. The system of lakes has been responsible for the increase in the numbers of fish and game fowl. Consequently many hunters have brought new businesses into the Tennessee Valley that are based on tourist trade. The ever increasing popularity of water sports as the new American past time has made the Tennessee Valley a new recreation center.

The increasingly popularity of the Tennessee Valley Authority was demonstrated in 1953 and 1954. President Eisenhower revealed his opposition to furthering the TVA when he referred to it as "creeping socialism". In 1954 he directed the Atomic Energy Commission to sign a contract with private power companies, the Dixon Yates "group" to supply 600,000 Kilowatts of power to the TVA. Public opposition to his proposal was so strong and bitter that Eisenhower had to admit defeat and the contract was later cancelled.³

³Link, Arthur, & Muzzey, David, OUR AMERICAN REPRESENTATIVE, (Boston, Ginn & Co., 1963), p. 678.

In short, the Federal Government has founded a project that has been beneficial to the whole nation -- not just the relatively small area it was designed to cover. Another important factor to consider is that the Tennessee Valley Authority has paid for itself. It seems logical and highly reasonable to assume that in the future there may be more governmental projects based on the same general idea.

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