HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On May 18, 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Act into law. The TVA Act was one of the first parts of Roosevelt’s New Deal, and aimed to help one of the most economically depressed regions in the country at the time, which was Tennessee. Soil erosion had deteriorated Tennessee farmland, the average income was well below the nation average, there were few electrical utilities, and according to W. Bruce Wheeler, a history professor at the University of Tennessee, “Only 1 percent of farm owners had indoor plumbing, 4 percent telephones, and 8 percent radios.”

The TVA Act was one of the most influential programs to impact both the people and landscape of Tennessee. The TVA not only brought thousands of jobs to Tennessee, but it also provided electricity to homes all across the state. (Think of how much electricity changed food preservation and farming among other things). The TVA was also responsible for completely changing the landscape of Tennessee through the creation of dams all over the state. While these dams brought electricity, employment, and other benefits, they also brought disruption of ecosystems and the displacement of over 70,000 residents.

The TVA continues today to supply hydro-electric power to millions of people in Tennessee and Alabama.

(Excerpt taken from the Tennessee Valley Authority entry in

Teaching with Primary Sources—MTSU

PRIMARY SOURCE SET: TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

The TVA was part of the New Deal, so several government-sponsored photographers documented this program in Tennessee. These photographs became part of the Library of Congress’s online collections, making them easy to access and use for your students.

This primary source set contains many images of both positive and negative impacts of the TVA.

1. Have students read the Tennessee Valley Authority entry on the Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture Web site.
2. Break the class up into four groups, and assign each group one of the pages in the primary source set.
3. Have students fill out the Primary Source Analysis Tool for the photographs and decide whether the images show a positive or negative impact of the TVA or both. Explain why. Pay careful attention to how the TVA impacted the environment.
4. Then, split the class into two groups and have a debate. One group should focus on the positive impacts of the TVA and the other group should focus on the negative impacts of the TVA.

For more lesson ideas see “The Big Picture: Celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Tennessee Valley Authority in Photographs” on the TPS-MTSU Web site.

ADDITIONAL LINKS

- Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs (Keyword: TVA)
- Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives (Keyword: TVA)
- Today in History: September 30
- Tennessee Valley Authority official Web site (click on TVA Kids at the top for activities for students and teachers)
Norris Dam, Tennessee. Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Lake created by Norris Dam provides swimming facilities for people of Knoxville. [Detail- 1942]

Construction work at the TVA's Douglas Dam, Tenn. [1942]

Electric phosphate smelting furnace used to make elemental phosphorus in a TVA chemical plant in the vicinity of Muscle Shoals, Alabama [1942]

Knox County, Tennessee (Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)). Mr. Bacon adjusts an electric fan for his wife who is using an electric iron. The Bacons use 500 kilowatt hours of TVA electricity a month [1942]

Switchyard at TVA's Wilson Dam hydroelectric plant, vicinity of Sheffield, Ala., 260 miles above the mouth of the Tennessee River [1942]
Wilson Dam, Alabama (Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)). Workers in chemical plant receive free medical care [1942; detail]

Early stages of construction work at the TVA’s Douglas Dam, Tenn. [1942]

Tennessee Valley Authority. Construction of Douglas Dam. Pay day at the TVA’s new Douglas Dam on the French Broad River. This dam will be 161 feet high and 1,682 feet long, with a 31,600 acre reservoir area extending forty-three miles upstream. With a useful storage capacity of approximately 1,330,000 acre-feet this reservoir will make possible the addition of nearly 100,000 kilowatts of continuous power to the TVA system in dry years and almost 170,000 kilowatts in the average year [1942]

Tennessee Valley Authority. Construction of Douglas Dam. Logs for the construction of a cofferdam at TVA’s new Douglas Dam on the French Broad River. This dam will be 161 feet high and 1,682 feet long, with a 31,600 acre reservoir area extending forty-three miles upstream. With a useful storage capacity of approximately 1,330,000 acre-feet this reservoir will make possible the addition of nearly 100,000 kilowatts of continuous power to the TVA system in dry years and almost 170,000 kilowatts in the average year [1942]
Lauderdale County, Alabama. Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). An electric refrigerator helps Mrs. Case keep eggs fresh [1942]

Knox County, Tennessee (Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)). Mr. [sic] Bacon using an electric churn [1942; detail]

General planning. A simplified diagram to explain the integrated functioning of the Authority's river control projects [between 1934 and 1943]

The Wilson Dam spans the Tennessee River between Lauderdale County and Colbert County, Alabama [2010]

Lauderdale County, Alabama. Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). An electric refrigerator helps Mrs. Case keep eggs fresh [1942]

Bridges. Highway bridge across an arm of Norris Lake which has been developed by the TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority), with local cooperation, for recreational uses. Note that, as on all TVA bridges where view is of importance, the parapet consists of a solid portion and an open rail to permit good view [between 1933 and 1945]
Collecting anopheles mosquitoes in malaria control area [1942]

General planning. This is a photograph of a display panel typical of the manner in which the Authority puts its case for comprehensive planning before the public. Explanatory material is placed at all powerhouse reception rooms, visitors' buildings and other public contact points. The increased understanding of natural resources, the techniques for their utilization and general planning for human welfare are considered valuable by-products of the Authority's program in themselves [between 1933 and 1945]

Smoke stack of TVA chemical plant where elemental phosphorus is made, vicinity of Muscle Shoals, Alabama [1942]

Knox County, Tennessee (Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)). Cows are milked by electricity on the Broadacre Dairy Farm [1942]
Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is April 18, 2011.


Palmer, Alfred T., photographer. “Tennessee Valley Authority. Construction of Douglas Dam. Pay day at the TVA’s new Douglas Dam on the French Broad River. This dam will be 161 feet high and 1,682 feet long, with a 31,600 acre reservoir area extending forty-three miles upstream. With a useful storage capacity of approximately 1,330,000 acre-feet this reservoir will make possible the addition of nearly 100,000 kilowatts of continuous power to the TVA system in dry years and almost 170,000 kilowatts in the average year.” Photograph. 1942. From Library of Congress: Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives. https://www.loc.gov/item/2017694890/

Palmer, Alfred T., photographer. “Tennessee Valley Authority. Construction of Douglas Dam. Logs for the construction of a cofferdam at TVA’s new Douglas Dam on the French Broad River. This dam will be 161 feet high and 1,682 feet long, with a 31,600 acre reservoir area extending forty-three miles upstream. With a useful storage capacity of approximately 1,330,000 acre-feet this reservoir will make possible the addition of nearly 100,000 kilowatts of continuous power to the TVA system in dry years and almost 170,000 kilowatts in the average year.” Photograph. 1942. From Library of Congress: Farm Security Administration / Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives. https://www.loc.gov/item/2017694912/


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