

Centennial Commentary: The TAS and the TVA

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For residents of the region, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) has long been a fact of life. During its nearly eighty years of existence, this agency transformed the Tennessee Valley in many ways, greatly improving agriculture, navigation, the general economy, and the well-being of the region's inhabitants. The Tennessee Academy of Science was early interested in this project and played a noteworthy role in the TVA's first decade.

The Tennessee Valley had long been one of the most economically depressed regions in the United States, a situation exacerbated by the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Frequent flooding made economic development all but impossible and even challenged the primitive agricultural efforts that characterized much of the valley. With little political support for any sort of relief, the region appeared doomed to continued poverty.

The 1932 election of President Franklin Roosevelt marked the beginning of a change in the fortunes of the Tennessee Valley. Elected largely as a rejection of the discredited policies of President Herbert Hoover and the Republican Party, Roosevelt and his Democratic allies were charged with implementing the vaguely defined "New Deal" that had become the catchword of the 1932 campaign. In a January 1933 speech, given nearly two months before his inauguration, the president-elect proposed a broad program of regional development for the seven states of the Tennessee Valley. He stressed regional planning and economic development, not only as a solution to the valley's difficulties, but also as a possible model for similar projects elsewhere. Four months later, in early April, Roosevelt laid his plans before Congress in the proposed

Tennessee Valley Act. The bill passed quickly and was signed in mid-May as one of the hallmark pieces of the First New Deal.

The Academy's connection with the TVA began almost at once. One of the three directors of the new agency was University of Tennessee President Harcourt Morgan, an original member of the organization. Morgan and his colleagues took steps to accomplish TVA goals through the construction of dams on the flood-prone rivers of the region. Equally important for regional development, however, were the plans for many of these dams to produce hydroelectric power, which would be distributed by the Authority itself, rather than private utility companies. This idea led to significant political and legal controversy during the 1930s before the concept of a government-directed public utility agency was accepted. By the end of World War II, flood control and the availability of electricity had dramatically improved the region's quality of life.

The new agency soon attracted the attention of the Tennessee Academy of Science, but the initial published response was a negative one. In the October 1933 issue of the *Journal of the Tennessee Academy of Science*, long-time member and former president A. E. Parkins, a geographer at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, provided a harshly critical overview of the TVA. Parkins had written his diatribe in early June, shortly after Roosevelt had signed the act, and immediately forwarded it to the journal. Published under the title, "The Tennessee Valley Project—Facts and Fancies," the essay included nearly twelve pages of text criticizing almost every aspect of the project. Dismissing the TVA as little more than traditional pork-barrel politics, Parkins expressed his displeasure

with the degree of government control over regional development, warned that additional study was needed, and pointed out that the federal government would almost certainly lose money on the project. Indeed, the continuous theme throughout his essay was the need for TVA to be run on a "business basis," in order to guarantee that the nation retained "the spirit of independence, self initiative, and enterprise" of the past. Seemingly unaware that the continuing economic depression called such a philosophy into question, Parkins insisted that the TVA should avoid the taint of an activist government.

A few months later, however, the Academy itself appeared to be less troubled by the prospects of a regional planning and development agency that would alleviate the plight of the Tennessee Valley. At its annual meeting in December, the Academy organized a symposium on "The Tennessee Valley Development Project." A Friday afternoon audience of more than 100 heard four papers discussing various aspects of the project, ranging from geographical and engineering considerations to comments concerning the sociological impact of such a major program. That evening, at the Academy banquet, the State Superintendent of Schools, Walter D. Cocking, discussed "The Educational Implications of the Tennessee Valley Authority" before an audience of more than 150. The Academy formalized its support at the next day's business meeting by adopting a resolution approving the general plans for the agency, stressing the need for political independence, and endorsing the proposed efforts to improve the "social order and the industrial, natural, and educational resources of the South."

Over the next few years, as the work of the TVA progressed, the Academy continued to show its interest. Two of the papers presented at the December 1933 symposium were later published in the *Journal* the following July. Fred J. Lewis, a member of the civil engineering faculty at Vanderbilt University, contributed "An Engineer Looks at the Tennessee Valley Project," providing a careful analysis of the specific goals of the project and the engineering required to accomplish them. Lewis went further, however,

pointing out various potential legal and political complications with the states and people involved. If such complications could be overcome, however, and the TVA and other New Deal programs were realized, he had no doubt that a new era would begin. Lewis's analysis was followed by the much briefer comments of K. C. Davis of the Agricultural Education department of George Peabody College for Teachers. Addressing the "Agricultural and Sociological Aspects of the Tennessee Valley Development Project," Davis summarized the many plans that were part of the project, stressing the significant changes to communities and populations in the region. Indeed, his descriptions of the potential benefits occasionally took on a utopian outlook, reflecting the growing awareness of the desperate conditions in the region.

As the project advanced over the next few years, the Academy served as an outlet for scholarly analysis of the TVA impact. Psychologist Lester R. Wheeler of the State Teachers College in Johnson City presented "A Study of the Remote Mountain People of the Tennessee Valley" at the 1934 meeting in Nashville. He emphasized that the information gathered from this long-term project would help to evaluate the social reconstruction component of the Tennessee Valley Authority programs. The Academy also provided a forum for TVA officials, as shown by a presentation at the spring 1937 meeting in Memphis by A. R. Cahn. Chief of the Biological Readjustment Division of the agency's Department of Forestry Relations, Cahn discussed at length the impact of TVA activity on the wildlife of the region. He described the many survey activities carried out by TVA scientists and technicians in their attempt to minimize the impact of construction so that game animals and birds, as well as fish, would continue to thrive in the Tennessee Valley region.

Although the Tennessee Academy of Science was never an active participant in the planning, construction, or management of the TVA, it nonetheless remained acutely aware of the magnitude and importance of the project. The Academy continued to provide its membership with insight concerning the TVA and also offered

a forum for the discussion of the project by individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds. By the eve of World War II, Academy members were well-versed concerning the details and progress of the ongoing Tennessee Valley Authority programs and were contributing in various ways to an understanding of the impact and implications of this major public project of the New Deal.

Suggested Reading

- Cahn, A. R. 1938. The work of the TVA in relation to the wildlife resources of the Tennessee Valley. *Journal of the Tennessee Academy of Science* 13: 174–179.
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