Controversy and Consequence: A Personal Look at TVA[1]

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Tonight I find myself in an unusual role — unusual for me at least. Dr. Charles Ogilvie has already welcomed you. And that is usually the task that the staff assigns to me in meetings of this sort. I sometimes suspect that a few welcoming remarks is something they feel is within my capabilities and that having had my moment in the sun I will then keep my cotton-picking hands off the rest of the program.

Tonight — or at least a few weeks ago when they began to put the program together — the staff thought I might do something else. So they gave me the topic first stated as "A History of TVA," then amended to "TVA and the River." Because my thoughts were well along on the first topic when they informed me of the shift of title, you will find elements of both in what I have to say.

What you hear on either topic — or both — will be the personal expression of one who has worked for TVA for nearly forty years, and never for anyone else. I make no pretense of objectivity. TVA is an organization that first captured, then earned, and has held my loyalty and high regard throughout these forty years. I think it's great. And my remarks will reflect that feeling.

In these forty years TVA has had fifteen Board Members: fifteen men who have shaped its policies and guided its work. I have known them all — have sat in meetings with them, gone on field trips with them, listened to their thoughts about the agency and its work. I have also had opportunities to present my views and to report on my part of the work while they listened. Each man, in his own way, is memorable because of these contacts. I have also watched each man, in his own way, respond to the controversies that have swirled around the agency from the beginning. And I have watched TVA emerge from these controversies a stronger agency working with stronger people in a stronger region.

Gordon Clapp, TVA's fourth chairman, was familiar with controversy and frequently talked about it. When he left the agency he left behind words that many of us in TVA have posted on our office wall or placed beneath the blotters on our desk. These are his words:

> TVA is controversial because it is consequential; let it become insignificant to the public interest, an agency of no particular account, and people will stop arguing about it.

I often think how much the agency reflects the river with which it works — the Tennessee. The controversial and consequential qualities of the agency reflect the same qualities in the river. Donald Davidson in his two volumes of the Tennessee talks about two rivers, the ancient and the modern. Today we usually think in terms of the modern river, converted by TVA into a stairstep series of lakes reaching upward from

Paducah to Knoxville. Tonight, tomorrow, and Sunday we are looking back to the old river. Hopefully, in so doing, we will better know and understand both the old and the new.

In the beginning, of course, was the ancient river rising among the even more ancient granites and other pre-Cambrian rocks of the mountains we now know as the southern Appalachians. From the pre-Cambrian — half a billion years old and older — the old river traces geologic time throughout its course down from the Appalachians, across the Cumberlands, and out into the more recent sands and clays of the Mississippi embayment in modern west Tennessee and Kentucky.

That the ancient river was consequential we may deduce from the number and size of the tributaries that it intercepted on their course to the sea: the Powell, the Clinch, the Holston, the French Broad, the Little Tennessee, the Hiwassee, the Elk, the Duck, the Big Sandy, and more. We can gauge its consequence again as we view its twisted emergence through the Cumberlands below Chattanooga. And we can confirm it again when we recall, from times now gone but yet modern, the great volumes of water it disgorged into the Ohio at Paducah during time of flood. And finally we can reflect that at no time did it receive an assist from the glaciers that warped and molded the courses of rivers further to the north.

Man first knew the Tennessee River perhaps 15,000 years ago during the final stages of the ice age. Small bands of nomadic hunters established their campsites along the river and its tributaries in pursuit of animals now extinct — mammoths, mastodons, camels, horses, and the straight-horned bison. The river was consequential to these precursors of the modern American Indian as a source of food and water and as a locale for his more permanent campsites.

Whether these primitive peoples ever used the river for transportation is doubtful. Certainly we have no hard evidence of the fact. But we do know that these primitive campsites gave way to later "permanent" villages, and temples, and burial mounds, and trading places of later Indian tribes of the Paleo-Indian, Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian cultures. Undoubtedly controversy thrived as each tribe sought to define and defend the territorial rights that man has perennially claimed and defended.

In prehistoric times — or as my grandson says, "in olden times," as in, "Grandpa, tell me about the olden times." Anyway, in prehistoric times the river demonstrated its "particular account" in determining the lives of the people who would live along it. Lewis and Kneburg report that

> Cultural differences existed in the three main divisions of the valley throughout most of the prehistoric period. During the burial mound era, while the Hamilton Indians lived along the quiet upper reaches, another group inhabited the shoals and rapids section of the river's great arc in Alabama; still others lived on the shores of the tranquil lower portion in western Tennessee.

European explorers, many of them traveling the river, found not only the evidence but the living practice of these cultural differences. The activities were the same as man has always practiced and practices today. But the differences between then and now lie in the way they were done. Take bathing, for instance. Today we usually bathe in the privacy of our home, but occasionally we flock to the public beach or pool or to the gang showers of the locker room. We accept, or in fact insist, on these bathing rituals as part of the tribal customs of modern culture. How many of us, I wonder, would join the Creek Tribes each morning, even in the cold of winter, when every man, woman, child — even babes in arms — joined in their tribal obligation to bathe in the river as soon as they awakened. Custom required that each submerge at least four times unless snow was on the ground. Then as a substitute they might roll four times in the snow; all this to make the body strong and free from sin.

Early in my field work with TVA I met a non-follower of the Creek Indian. I asked him if the water in a certain creek was cold. "Sure it is," he responded. "That's why I'm so dirty."

If we except Madoc, the twelfth century Welshman, and DeSoto, the sixteenth century Spaniard, historic man's first knowledge of the Tennessee came about two centuries ago when French hunters and trappers from the north and their English counterparts from the east first explored the legend and the fact of animal treasure to be obtained from the Valley of the Tennessee. The conflict and controversy of this simultaneous and consequential discovery by the great powers of Europe reached their climax at Fort Loudoun on the banks of the Little Tennessee in the heart of the Overhill Cherokee.

Few people have found the Tennessee River more consequential than the Donelson party in the winter of 1779-80. Pushing down from the Watauga settlement in east Tennessee, Donelson survived the rigors of the shoals along the Holston, passed through the Suck, the Boiling Pot, the Skillet, and the Frying Pan, only to emerge shortly onto the shoals of north Alabama: Elk River, Muscle Shoals, Bee Tree, and Colbert. Delay mounted on delay, yet Donelson and his flotilla found that only the river provided ultimate passage to his destination at the French Lick, now modern-day Nashville. Donelson's one thousand miles and four months on the Tennessee, Ohio, and Cumberland circumnavigated the spot where we meet tonight and opened the region to that we know today.

Of all the features of the Tennessee River the most consequential and, over time, the most controversial, is Muscle Shoals. Or should it be "are Muscle Shoals?" Whichever we call it, this great barrier has churned both water and controversy even as in the end it provided the political pathway to the modern river. The Indian found Muscle Shoals to be a source of food but a hindrance to the normally graceful glide of his canoe; white man found it an almost insurmountable obstacle to his way of life and to the avenues of commerce on which that life depends. Because of Muscle Shoals a great river lay broken near its middle into two lesser rivers — one above, another below. Rafts, flat-

boats, keel boats, and steamboats alike could not dependably traverse Muscle Shoals. Commerce came to a standstill and with it culture and economic growth.

From John C. Calhoun and Andy Jackson to Senator George Norris and Franklin D. Roosevelt the issue of states versus Federal rights and responsibilities surged about Muscle Shoals. The same issue was neatly bypassed at the Suck, Skillet, Frying Pan, and Boiling Pot when responsibility for building Hales Bar Dam below Chattanooga was turned over to a private power company. As so often happens in response to national emergency, the issue was momentarily laid aside with the building of Wilson Dam using Federal funds during World War I. But neither the dam nor the munitions plants for which it was to provide power were finished before war's end; so the issue broke out anew. As a New England schoolboy in the twenties my classes in current events were enlivened by discussion of Henry Ford's offer to buy the whole kit and kaboodle for one dollar and thus take the problem out of the hands of government forever. Need I add that those of us who thrilled to the magic of his Model T and who kept time to his revival of the square dance and the old fiddler thought Henry Ford had made a pretty good offer.

Another national emergency, the depression of the nineteen thirties, found the issue still alive and growing under the constant prodding of the gentleman from Nebraska. Senator Norris foresaw the consequence of abundant electricity for rural America and recognized in Muscle Shoals the means of lighting the countryside and lightening the drudgery that was then the plague of every farm family. In the early flush of the New Deal, Roosevelt and Norris prevailed. The TVA Act became law on May 18, 1933. One month later the Tennessee Valley Authority came into being with the first meeting of its first Board of Directors. The TVA program was under way. Seldom since has the program proceeded far without being controversial, and never since has it proceeded without being consequential.

My own experience with TVA began formally, I suppose, when I reported to work in the eighty-degree temperature of Knoxville on June 1, 1934, just at the end of its first year. My Harris tweed suit did not fit either me or the occasion. But within its breast pocket was the telegram offering me a job with TVA and, more important, enough money to last until the first payday. Or at least, so I hoped.

My knowledge of the region provided a scant reservoir of confidence to face this first venture away from the familiar surroundings of New England and into my first job. Tennessee, I knew, had two cities whose names ended in "-ville" and began with the "N" sound. One was the capital, the other the headquarters of TVA. I wasn't too certain which was which. I also knew that each was associated with a President of the United States whose first name was Andrew — one Johnson and the other Jackson. But much more, I did not know. A glimpse of a sign confirmed which President, and more important at the time, which hotel was claimed by Knoxville. A smaller sign on a door of TVA's headquarters in the New Sprankle Building confirmed that I was in the right city.

My first six months with TVA lacked today's provisions for training and indoctrination. I was largely on my own. My immediate supervisor was insecure, broken by the depression and not yet fully recovered. Any task assigned to me could be managed easily in a couple of hours, leaving ample time to explore the resources of TVA's Technical Library and, later, the Knoxville Municipal Library. They both provided funds of information; the latter a wife as well. My reading helped me develop a broad, if not fully accurate, knowledge of TVA and the region it served. On the whole, these first few months were heady with the challenge of new ideas and personal contacts with the great and near-great architects of the New Deal. As the six months extended into six years, growing responsibilities and growing family extended the challenge both at work and in leisure: hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, folk singing, folk and square dancing, trips throughout the region to help conduct for TVA an inventory of the Valley's scenic resources — its mountains, forests, streams, waterfalls, caves, river bluffs, and other scenic features.

Two remarks tell much about the job: First, there was the response of New England friends to whom I attempted to describe what I did for TVA: "What? You get paid for that?" And then there was the afternoon at Fort Deposit Bluff in north Alabama when I came on a fisherman relaxed in the afternoon sunshine. He watched me arrive, set up a camera, make notes, and finally take a picture of the bluff, the fisherman reclining in the foreground. As I prepared to leave he roused, came over to me, and inquired, "Do you work for this TVA government?" I replied in the affirmative. "Is this work?" Again my affirmative response. "How long you been working for them?" "About two years." "That's the trouble with TVA. The work ain't so hard but it's awful regular."

Most of the controversies that have swirled about TVA in the past forty years have been concerned with the three "E's" of Environment, Energy, and Economics. If we count the debate of the nineteen thirties as to whether the same dam could serve the three purposes of navigation, flood control, and power, I suppose we need to precede these by a fourth "E:" Engineering. I recall the learned articles that flatly stated neither TVA nor the Valley could possibly come to any good end, for it was demonstrable that no dam could store water to generate electricity while reserving space for flood control. The floods of 1936 and 1937 stilled this controversy when Norris Dam, the first of the then embryonic TVA system to be completed, averted major floods at Chattanooga and Cairo while providing the first new supplies of hydroelectric electricity to the infant power system.

Excepting Engineering, Energy came first. TVA's policy of cheap and abundant power for all the countryside was the bellweather for a national effort toward rural electrification and involved us heavily in controversy with utility moguls of the time. His skirmish with TVA made Wendell Wilkie a national figure even as he lost the contest for the Republican nomination of 1940 to Thomas E. Dewey. Energy questions, of course, lay at the heart of the great constitutional questions of the thirties. The Ashwander and TEPCO litigation settled once and for all

the constitutionality of the TVA Act and the right of the people of the United States through their Federal Government to develop the resources of the river for the benefit of all. Less dramatic only in comparison with the power issue were the issues surrounding TVA's efforts to bring the energy of fertilizers to the land and to produce abundant supplies of food and fibre needed alike in periods of depression, war, and postwar reconstruction.

The nineteen forties and World War II found TVA the only agency and the Tennessee Valley the only place capable of producing the necessary power to produce the necessary aluminum to make the necessary planes for the war effort. The forties also found new sources of hydroelectric power in the Valley essentially exhausted. The need for ever more supplies of energy confronted TVA with all the issues that have surrounded governmental production of power from fossil and nuclear fuels. You do not need to be reminded that these issues are still with us and promise to be around for a long time.

Almost inseparable from Energy issues have been those concerned with Economics. The famous "yardstick" theory posed TVA's experience with power production at the lowest possible cost as the measure against which the experience of private utilities was to be tested. This, of course, kicked it all off; and its consequences have been felt throughout the nation, even today. But economic considerations have also interlaced other TVA programs: "Plant Trees — Grow Jobs;" royalty-free licenses for national, indeed international, production of fertilizers developed and tested by TVA; the introduction of fertilizers into total farm management; the reservation of industrial sites along the modern river to guarantee jobs and to reserve the crushing economic and, therefore, human loss of outmigration of the Valley's people, especially its youth; the inter-territorial freight rate studies of the nineteen thirties and the famous barge grain case of the sixties. These are only a few of the issues where TVA work has represented the "cutting edge" of regional development. Most have been controversial; all have been consequential.

TVA's concern with the environment began in the nineteen thirties, although major controversy did not come until later. Nobody was against healing erosion, preventing forest fires, planting trees, or providing new opportunities for recreation. Nobody was against creating lakes where only a muddy and erratic stream ran before. Nobody was against pure water and clean air. Nobody was against treating a dam or power plant as an architectural masterpiece as well as an engineering wonder. Not until the economics of energy required vast quantities of low-cost coal for fuel and great volumes of water for cooling did TVA find itself on the opposite (meaning non-popular) side of environmental issues. The black soot of the homes and cities of the thirties became TVA's black hat of the sixties. Dams, become commonplace, were no longer architectural and engineering marvels. Historic and natural places could suffer from neglect and decay but could no longer be replaced by public works or other marks of progress. Indeed, it sometimes seems that today only in Land Between The Lakes is TVA perceived to wear a white hat — and not always even here.

Energy, Economics, Environment — our wildest imaginings cannot conjure up three topics closer to our daily lives. The continued health and vigor of the river, and the region that it serves, depend on maintaining a healthy balance between the three. TVA and the people and the agencies with whom it works are pledged to maintain this balance now as in the past forty years. Forty years, incidentally, is one-fifth of all the two hundred years since historic man first knew the river. In another forty years it will be one-third. The modern river is on its way toward becoming the historic river.

Like the historic river that Donald Davidson traces beneath the modern river of lakes, the Tennessee River of today remains both controversial and consequential. The river of today provides for man's commerce, his livelihood, and his leisure even as did the historic river in its day. Tonight and in the next day or so we will try to relive and renew the skills and arts and crafts and activities that man pursued along the banks of the historic river. Now, as it did at neighboring Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, controversy occasionally emerges and will continue to emerge.

Because the modern river is what it is — the central focus of a lusty and lively and new way of life — I think the future will survive controversy to produce numerous programs that, like this, will celebrate the river. And I expect that, like the river, TVA will remain what Gordon Clapp said it is: "Controversial because it is consequential."

1. These remarks were made by Mr. Howes before the **Rivers Workshop: Crafts and Culture,** at Brandon Spring Group Camp in Land Between The Lakes, April 26, 1974.