



**(Above)** Wilson Dam Construction – Photographs of Crews Show Workmen Were Segregated by Race, 1922-1925; Records of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Record Group 142; National Archives and Records Administration – Atlanta, Identifier No. 6125743

and in peace time. In war times, the plant would manufacture essential products for ammunitions inside the U.S., decreasing reliance on foreign suppliers. In peace time, the nitrates would be used to create fertilizers for the nation's farmland, however, after World War I the plants likewise went unused. After February 1919, the 2,306-acre site and all its auxiliary properties sat idle for 14 years. Although the federal government did attempt to sell off its surplus wartime properties, the factories and dams of the Shoals among them, no bids were accepted. One of the more famous of the bids came from Henry Ford. The motor giant aspired to make a new Detroit of the South in the quickly developing town of Muscle Shoals. In 1920, Ford made a visit to the area with another well-known industrialist, Thomas Edison. Ford offered the government \$5 million for the entire property with plans to create an industrial corridor some 75 miles long, starting in Muscle Shoals and running along the river. Ford's and all other offers was rejected and little was done with the Shoals for over a decade – until the creation of the TVA.

## TVA and Its Many Goals and Programs

The 1933 TVA Act outlined the various goals of the authority many of which had a cascading effect and lead to more and more projects and programs aimed at elevating the economic status of the valley. The largest objective of the TVA was to engineer control over the Tennessee River and many of its smaller tributaries by constructing dams, locks, and lakes. These dams would in turn generate hydroelectric power, which could be used to power factories or be sold to customers. Contributing to the valley's agricultural decline was decades of intense farming, deforestation, and soil erosion. In response, the TVA initiated programs of reforestation and soil restoration. In addition to the political, military, and environmental objectives of the TVA, the agency aimed to alleviate the strains of the depression on the people of the valley. These primary objectives necessitated several other projects, surveys, and programs.

## Dams, Water Control, and Power

The central objective of the TVA was to control the Tennessee River by constructing dams and creating a navigable deep-water route for shipping transport. In North Alabama, three dams were either constructed or controlled by the TVA: Gunterville Dam in Marshall County, Wheeler Dam between Lawrence and Lauderdale counties, and Wilson Dam between Colbert and Lauderdale counties. These dams each created a corresponding lake of the same name. The dams and locks effectively solved the issue with the shallow shoals and improved the navigability of the river. Alongside enhanced navigability, the dams created hydroelectricity which could be sold at a reasonable price in a time when some power bills were in excess of a resident's mortgage. Electric power became the backbone of the TVA; it is still one of the largest power suppliers in the country today.

One of the purposes of the authority's creation during the depression was to improve the overall economic and social conditions of the people living in the valley. Differing from private corporations, the authority did not only sell power at an extremely discounted rate, but it engaged in a campaign for rural electrification. In the 1920s, only about 3% of rural

residents in the Tennessee Valley had electricity. According to census data, as of 1934, about one in every 30 Alabama farms had electricity. TVA and its cheap power helped to reduce that number to 1 in 7 farms by 1939 and TVA was supplying power to more than 400,000 residents in North Alabama by 1940. The North Alabama dams produced half of all the kilowatts produced by TVA in their initial operation – more than 480,000 kilowatts of power. The rate of rural electrification after World War II increased dramatically, with more farms lighted in a two-month period in 1949 than had been accomplished since the TVA was created in 1933.

In order to accomplish the widespread rural electrification, TVA needed to inform people of the benefits of electricity and electrical appliances. Many rural farmers understood electricity to be a luxury, something for city folk, but not anything essential to the needs of a farm. TVA conducted surveys, sent demonstration agents to set up model kitchens, dairies, and farms to illustrate the usefulness of labor-saving appliances. The TVA distributed pamphlets and flyers in which “emphasis [was] placed on adequate wiring, the use of electricity to increase income, and the ways it can be used to save some of the long hours farm women spend in the kitchen and laundry” and sought “to promote better health, refrigeration, electric cooking, and especially running water for the farm.” The introduction of specifically farm-related tools like haydriers and hay hoists, electric hotbeds, and poultry house lighting were intended to convince the farmers that electricity was a need that would save labor, raise production, and pay for itself.

Previous to the TVA, private corporations had considered rural areas to be too costly to develop. The potential revenue from the isolated rural farmstead was not sufficient enough to warrant the costs associated with wiring and supplying to remote areas. But TVA had government support and through their demonstrations and favorable rates they collected loyal customers. Some power companies attempted to move into the valley after TVA had already established transmission lines, however, some recall that the loyal TVA consumers chopped down potential competitors' poles and lines.