



**(Top)** Tennessee Valley Fertilizer Cooperative near Decatur, Morgan County, 1938 **(Above)** Man Driving a Cart of Cotton, Tennessee Valley, Historic Photograph Collection, 1933-1980, Circa 1935 (Records of the Tennessee Valley Authority, National Archives and Records Administration – Atlanta)

## Wilson Dam and Nitrate Plant No. 2

In 1933, the TVA was given control of its first dam – Wilson Dam – straddling the Tennessee River between Colbert and Lauderdale counties. The TVA also took control of the adjacent U. S. Nitrate Plant No. 2 (U.S.N.P.2), which it converted to the production of fertilizer. Between the dam and the nitrate plant in the Shoals, TVA was well on its way towards fulfilling one of its main goals – restoration of farmland. In order to staff these facilities, workers were hired by the hundreds, usually from the surrounding area as part of the overall New Deal/ Depression-era public works program to put people to work and restart the economy. In a time and place that mainly relied on agriculture and lacked extensive roadways, public transportation, and individual car ownership, collecting workers at the dam and plant involved housing and many of the amenities that come along with a community.

Wilson Dam Village No. 2 was located to the southwest of U.S.N.P.2, north of the city of Muscle Shoals. It was constructed as semi-permanent housing. In 1918, there was a village of temporary housing built to house construction workers, although the exact location is unknown. The temporary housing was designed to hold multiple families in one low, simple building. The semi-permanent housing built by TVA included individual homes complete with yards and street lighting. Although Wilson Dam Village No. 2 is no longer extant, there were some worker villages designed to be permanent, like the town of Norris in Tennessee which accompanied Norris Dam or what became Fontana Village in North Carolina. Evidenced by photographs and topographic maps, some aspects of the design of these villages appear to have been at Wilson Dam Village No. 2 as well.

When considering the construction of a workers’ village, the TVA took into account the accessibility to the dam or other construction sites, avoidance of rugged terrain, land nearby that was suitable for cultivation, as well as a nearby community or larger urban center that might be able to provide things not found in the worker’s village. Most of the houses were individual, single-family homes with some larger apartment housing and boarding houses for single, unmarried employees. The

houses would sit on a lot about 0.3-acres each, with narrow frontage to reduce the cost of roadways, sewer, water mains, and street lighting, although the lots would be deep to provide a feeling of private space.

TVA wanted to build curvilinear roads that follow the natural contour of the land with several culs-de-sac or dead-ends to discourage through traffic. The roads would be clear of billboards, shacks, and small roadside vendors to ensure the natural beauty of the valley. The roads would also be paved and there would be no street curbs or sidewalks, only gutters for durability and low maintenance. Street lighting and other services would be located in the rear of the houses and underground as to not interfere with the trees. Only native plants would be used for ornamental plantings.

In line with TVA policies on the importance of farming, each village would be provided with about a 4-acre plot within easy access for all residences for which employees could practice subsistence farming if desired. Finally, the village should have a protective zone around it to protect it from random and uncontrolled growth thought to threaten the maintenance, standards, and land use of the community. Wilson Dam Village No. 2 appears to have had several of these characteristics when it was in operation. It may have also had some auxiliary buildings to help support the worker community like public parks or recreational spaces, a public hall, administration building, stores, gas stations, service garages, and a public school. If these elements were not at Wilson Dam Village No. 2, then some of them most likely were found at various other worker villages supporting Wheeler or Guntersville dams.

In addition to the workers’ village and whatever amenities that community might offer, employees of TVA at Wilson Dam and U.S.N.P.2 were offered training programs during their leisure hours which were scheduled to accommodate all shifts. These programs furthered training for the positions already obtained as well as provided an opportunity to explore vocational interests or obtain information for positions outside the TVA. Instruction was provided on topics such as agriculture, construction work, engineering, other trades, and general education, as well as recreation and home planning and management for women.