

## African Americans and the TVA

A short article published in *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life* in 1934 entitled “The TVA and the Race Problem,” expresses the gaps between the TVA’s expectations –the public’s and of itself – and the realities played out in the early months of the agency. According to the official policy of the TVA, African Americans were to be hired in proportion to their number in the surrounding area’s population, although the applicants would be subjected to the same tests and standards as all others applying for the same position. This policy was intended to reflect equality of employment, but as the author, Cranston Clayton, points out the TVA often fell short of these goals in practice. Frequently, TVA received complaints from the African American community about the lack of African American workers at specific projects or in specific positions. Furthermore, there was evidence that people of color were excluded from many of the secondary benefits of the TVA such as training, farm demonstrations, model poultry plants, and dairy farm pasteurizing plants.

The status quo of segregation was often inhibiting to the TVA. Although the federal government mandated that the agency employ a percentage of African American workers, this required separate facilities to be built. It appears that if the percentage of the population of African Americans in the area was too small and the cost of building and maintaining separate facilities was too great, people of color may not have been employed at all. This appeared to be true of some of the places in Eastern Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and Kentucky. For example, Knoxville’s Norris Dam employee base consisted of less than 2% African American workers despite the surrounding counties’ over 7% African American demographic. This deficiency was chalked up to the low number of qualified workers among the African American population. Local people of color claimed that they had no knowledge of the examinations necessary to qualify for positions. If they had known, they had been explicitly told by local white people that they need not bother applying. This notion was confirmed by the TVA’s lack of intention to use workers of color on the Norris Dam construction itself. Apparently building separate facilities for so few African American workers was not economical.

Boldfaced racism and violence occurred on occasion in areas where the two populations had little contact until the TVA projects. Fontana Dam in North Carolina had no African American residents within 30 miles of the work site. People of color intended to work on the dam needed to be recruited when the dormitories and cafeteria facilities for their exclusive use were complete and functional. At that time, a total of 192 African Americans were supposed to be recruited, however, the local white population resented this decision. Correspondence between the Principal Personnel Officer at Fontana Dam and Chief of the TVA Employment Division stated: “Rumors had reached this office that [the white workers] would not permit [workers of color] to work on this project, but as we had experienced rumors of this type on several other projects, and as nothing was ever done to prevent the employment of Negroes, we put very little credence in the rumors.” The memo went on to detail the events that occurred in early July, referred to as the “Negro Situation” when a mob of about 75 white workers descended on the 21 African American men newly arrived at their dormitories. TVA safety officers succeeded in dispersing the crowd that night, but violent threats and rock throwing took place the next day. Although only one man was injured by the violence, the group of African American workers were successfully scared off the job, only 6 reported for duty. As of the time of the memo most of the violence had dissipated and future troubles were not expected.

Another example of racial discrimination is detailed in correspondence dated November 1943 through February 1944 between John W. Reed, “an American citizen, tax-payer and one who voted for public powers,” and Mr. Gordon R. Clapp - responding on behalf of Mr. David E. Lilienthal, Chairman of the TVA. Mr. Reed wrote to voice concerns about the hiring – or the lack thereof – of African American carpenters on TVA projects. Mr. Reed wrote that “since the birth of the T.V.A., there [has] never been a negro employed as a carpenter on the construction of any one of the dams, although they have been called upon for interviews. About seventy-five (75) Negro carpenters were employed at Pickwick in 1935 to build a village, as I have been informed, to house Negro employees, but which they never did occupy.” Mr. Reed also mentioned the known employment of ten African American carpenters in the summer of

1942 in Knoxville, however, their positions were terminated six months later. Again, in August of 1943, eight African American carpenters were employed in Clifton, Tennessee, but had no jobs by November. At the end of the letter Mr. Reed questioned why the TVA does not seem to be employing African American carpenters (presumably a position of great need and importance in nearly all projects conducted by the TVA), ending with: “My generation grew up disappointed. Will we let the next generation do likewise?”

The official stance of the TVA was that its policy and practice is “to employ Negroes in proportion to their population ratio in the Tennessee Valley, to employ Negroes in broad categories of work in which they are experienced, and further, to seek methods of increasing the employment of Negroes in categories of work in which, as a group, they are not experienced and for which they require additional training. This policy has involved aggressive recruitment and training activities without which many of the present 2500 or more Negro employees would not now hold their present positions. The Tennessee Valley Authority intends to continue and to extend its activities in this regard, with the assistance of its employees and the communities in which Tennessee Valley Authority employees live.” However, it appears that even though these well-intentioned policies may have been the official position of TVA, they were not always put into practice.

In this particular situation, it was argued that none of the men from the African American population were suited for the work needed at the time – “heavy” construction, instead of “light” construction. Contrarily, Mr. Reed found this a “flimsy” and “undemocratic” excuse stating that “if all applications were filled with reference to any other subject except as to ‘COLOR’ there would have never been any cause for this complaint nor for many others that preceded it.” Mr. Reed coolly denounced the notion that there were not enough qualified African American carpenters to fill needed positions in the TVA and ends his correspondence demanding, “Now I would like very much to know why, IN THE WHOLE SYSTEM OPERATED BY THE TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY, THERE ARE NO NEGROES EMPLOYED AS CARPENTERS? I trust that you can give the true answer.” But there is no response on record.