

TVA and North Alabama

While racial discrimination and violence was surely not unknown to the TVA and all other aspects of American life, particularly during segregation, the projects of North Alabama and the Middle Tennessee Valley are quiet on such accounts. There is no apparent evidence that the Wilson, Wheeler, and Guntersville dams and other projects in North Alabama did not employ the proper percentage of workers of color. Wheeler Dam, in Lawrence County, is known to have employed 523 men in 1934 – the appropriate percentage of them were men of color. The workmen were paid 45 cents for unskilled labor and \$1.00 for skilled labor (presumably a day), the same rates were applied to all workers regardless of race. Census records, documentary photographs, and known anecdotes suggest that the discrimination people of color experienced in other parts of the valley did not occur to such a degree in the Middle Tennessee Valley. This may be because the majority of people of color in the valley resided – and reside still – in the Middle Tennessee Valley of North Alabama and in west Tennessee. Perhaps, their relatively high numbers made it easier for the TVA to achieve their policy of racial equality – or at least racial proportions – uninhibited by the financial burdens of providing separate facilities for so few individuals. Whereas there is not abundant evidence of negative effects of the TVA on people of color in North Alabama, that does not mean that no family of color experienced negative consequences.

North Alabama lacks well-documented cases of violence or discrimination against people of color by the TVA. Despite the official policy to treat all residents of the valley equally, institutional segregation and discrimination affected the community of color nonetheless. Primarily, the family removal that occurred along the river in preparation of the dams was undoubtedly arranged in favor of more wealthy landowners over poorer landowners and tenants, regardless of race. Consider the following: landowners of color were a small percentage of a minority of the population; they often did not own large amounts of land; their farmland was primarily subsistence and did not offer a large surplus income; and a disproportionate number of these landowners owned the most undesirable land along the constantly-flooding river. Therefore,

even if a family of color owned their farm, it was unlikely they had the means to control their futures by moving to comparable or improved land elsewhere or to an urban center. Also, while factory work was available, offered, and accepted by many people of color, at the same time, farming families of color were forced to give up their preferred way of life when the TVA came to North Alabama.

According to Dr. Melissa Walker in a 1998 journal article, *African Americans and TVA Reservoir Property Removal: Race in a New Deal Program*, “The TVA’s vision for the appropriate shape of valley agriculture was one of mechanized, commercial farms. The agency’s directors believed that it benefited the entire regional economy to move poor ineffective farmers off the land in order to free up resources to help more prosperous farmers expand.” Dr. Walker also outlines the various hardships encountered in regards to conscious or unconscious prejudice against people of color. All TVA case workers were white and while the early case workers may have been from the nearby communities, in an effort to approach the tasks professionally and systematically, by the late 1930s, all case workers were educated outsiders with little insight or sympathy for the communities they serviced. Many case file notes dictate the racial discrimination, which was probably perceived as mild by the case workers themselves. The case file notes make assumptions and remarks about the client’s presumed activeness, work ethic, and/or intelligence. The prejudice against people of color for their lack of education was a widespread occurrence in the valley and many agents falsely assumed that families of color were not going to be affected by the removal, were not being forced to leave deep-rooted communities, and that they would be more than willing and eager to leave farming all together.

The family removal records for people of color in North Alabama contained few follow ups that detailed the new lives of those who were made to move making it difficult to discern just how disruptive this event was on the population at large. Renters were arguably better off as their wealthy white landlords usually owned a large amount of land, some of which was likely to be outside of the taking zone proposed by the TVA. Many records referred to landowners making a blanket

assurance that their tenants would be taken care of. If relations were not amiable between tenants and landowners, then oftentimes an adjacent landowner may take on the extra tenant. Some owners opted to move their house to another portion of their own land or to a new parcel if possible. In some cases, landowners of color were unable to find new land with their resources and were forced to rent.

Dr. Walker discusses the lack of understanding and recognition of a community of color on behalf of the TVA case workers. In many instances in East Tennessee, the case files remark on landowners moving from their own well-established property to rented property within an African American neighborhood. The case worker seemed pleased and well-assured that the family would be settled quickly because they would be among their own race. “Workers assumed that, because African Americans were excluded from community leadership posts and from the white community, they did not have a community of their own and did not suffer from community displacement after relocation. Workers used ‘community’ to refer only to the white community.” The lack of realization of the existence of a community of color may also speak to why no farmers of color were included in the test-demonstration farms or sometimes in the training – these benefits were meant to better the community and worked through community cooperatives, for which the community of color was thought to have none. Furthermore, no concern was given for the fact that the family had to leave their own community or give up the advantage of property ownership.

Most houses owned by landowners were reported to be in better shape with better furniture than renters. Similarly, the clothing and health of owners was reportedly above average for people of color in the area. The case workers often reported that most people of color were pleasant and agreeable toward them and generally supportive or ambivalent to the TVA as a whole. This might seem surprising for how disruptive relocation must have been, particularly for landowners who had worked towards having their own land, just to have it taken away. The TVA case workers were not intended to be support networks or even facilitate any aid for the people they surveyed. Although there is often evidence that case workers would refer white families to other divisions from which