

This document analysis was written for the Practice & Theory of History class I took in my senior year of college (2005-2006). The object was to discuss how a particular primary source would fit into my fifteen-page term paper for the class, as well as to discuss any problems encountered with the source (authorial bias, intended audience, accuracy of information, etc.) and how this would affect my use of the source in my paper.

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### **Excerpts from *TVA Photography***

These black and white photos from the Tennessee Valley Authority archives were collected, organized, and in some cases captioned by Patricia Bernard Ezzell, the TVA's official historian. She has published independent work in the *Journal of East Tennessee History* and other scholarly publications<sup>1</sup>, and takes care to announce at the beginning of this book that "the work reflected here is mine alone and should not be interpreted as representing any office or official of the TVA."<sup>2</sup> The book's intended audience is, I believe, the general public; while it was published by a university press, it is still designed as something of a "coffee table book," oversized and with the photos and text presented in a slick, eye-catching manner.

Overall, the photos tell a story of progress towards a cleaner, brighter, more technologically-dependent future. The photos of the two households, one pre-electrification and one in the new town of Norris, are the epitome of this comparison. In the first one, a family crowds around a fireplace (which, since they are all in short sleeves, makes me wonder if this photo was at all staged to look as it does). The edge of the bed that can be seen on the right side

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<sup>1</sup> University Press of Mississippi, <[http://www.upress.state.ms.us/catalog/fall2003/tva\\_photography.html](http://www.upress.state.ms.us/catalog/fall2003/tva_photography.html)>, accessed 19 February 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Bernard Ezzell, *TVA Photography: Thirty Years of Life in the Tennessee Valley*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003, ix.

gives the impression that this is a very small dwelling, perhaps only one or two rooms. The floor looks dirty, and the people in the picture thin, sunburnt, wrinkled. In contrast, the picture from three years later in the town of Norris gives the impression of space: the room is bright and clean, and there is only living room furniture in it; it does not appear to double as any other room. The electric radiators and lamp are featured prominently in the picture. The family in it is dressed in brighter colors and has more comfortable seating. The floor is clean and polished. The mother and daughter are both reading.

Other photos show the same kind of progress. Photos of the dams are inevitably taken from perspectives which highlight their massiveness and the solidity of their concrete materials. Charles Krutch's composition on page 23, with a single man dwarfed by Hiwassee Dam, is one of many examples of this. Often, as in the photo of Norris Dam under construction, or the Norris family, the photo has been taken at night, with the subject revealed by new electric lights. As Ezzell writes under the photo of Jackson, Tennessee, lit up on a summer night in 1947, "Electricity conservation was not an issue."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the photos chosen for this book blare out light from all angles; they are composed to highlight the wonders of electricity as much as possible, and envelop their subjects, whether a city street or a young family, in a rosy incandescent glow.

Even the few photos which at first seem antithetical to this idea of progress through technology can in some way be interpreted as falling in line with that general theme. The photograph of the field of tree stumps on the land being cleared for Wheeler Reservoir is one of these. While from a modern perspective, the sight of so many trees cut down can be shocking, carrying connotations of endless strip malls and urban sprawl, it is entirely possible that in 1935,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 135.

it was seen in a completely different light. This is something I feel I will be continually running into as I do research for this paper. In my primary sources from the time period I am discussing, I keep expecting to see some reference to negative environmental or social impacts, but they just do not exist in sources such as these.

I think this source is particularly interesting because it is both primary and secondary. The photos are of course from the early and middle parts of the time period my paper will most likely cover, but they were put together more than sixty years after most of them were taken. Ezzell's interpretation of them cannot help but be visible in the choice of photographs and how she organizes them. The implication of using a chronological method of displaying these photos is that progress, TVA-style, is generally good. The last photo, of a man "who appears to be pleased with his cover crop" along with a caption including statistics of crop and livestock yields<sup>4</sup>, ends the book on a high note, one of appreciation for all that the TVA has done for the region. Not knowing the extent of the TVA's photo archives, I cannot say whether Ezzell would have made this book differently if more pictures like the cleared forest had been available in addition to the photos of satisfied citizens in TVA country.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 164.