

# GEOGRAPHERS AND THE TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY\*

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**ABSTRACT.** The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was the largest, most comprehensive, and most controversial regional development and planning project in U.S. history. Geographers were involved from its inception and made impressive contributions. Aside from the unit area method of data gathering and mapping, little is known about their contributions, some of which were truly ahead of their time. Although their work and recommendations were often discarded and unheeded because of political turbulence, the geographers rarely complained or entered into the political arena. Their work in the TVA has generally gone unheralded and even unappreciated within the geography profession. The primary purpose of this article is to document their contributions. *Keywords:* *geographical synthesis, Tennessee Valley Authority, trade area analysis, unit area method.*

On 19 April 1933, after less than one month in office, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt eloquently argued before the U.S. Congress that the comprehensive development and planning of the entire Tennessee Valley drainage basin would be an important antidote for the Great Depression. He insisted that the project “transcends mere power development: it enters the wide fields of flood control, reforestation, elimination from agricultural use of marginal lands, and the distribution and diversification of industry” (quoted in Rosenman 1933, 123). In fact, the project would require the planned and coordinated development of all the resources in a seven-state area (Clapp 1956, 6). When President Roosevelt signed the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Act on 18 May 1933, he launched the largest, most ambitious, and unquestionably most controversial regional development planning project in U.S. history—and the only such project ever undertaken in the nation.

The TVA was organized into about a dozen divisions and several offices, each with a number of subsections. Each unit would have considerable authority, and its leaders were to be encouraged to offer suggestions for achieving the general TVA goals. An active and involved three-man board would make final policy. All hiring and firing was to be nonpolitical, and advancement was to be by merit and performance only. Most novel, and very controversial, was how the TVA would take over the functions of half a dozen government bureaus and agencies in the TVA watershed (Lilienthal 1953).

The general goals of the TVA were to improve agriculture, industry, and commerce and to elevate the general standard of living in the region. Farming, the pri-

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