

# Border States

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*Border States*, the official journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association, is published biennially. Although preference is given to work previously presented as papers at the organization's annual meetings, the editors welcome the submission of manuscripts dealing with all aspects of the Kentucky-Tennessee region. Completed manuscripts of no more than fifteen double-spaced pages—including notes, works cited, or bibliography—should be submitted in duplicate. Send manuscripts to: Ellen Donovan (English) or Mary Hoffschwelle (History) in care of Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee 37132, by September 1, 2006. Manuscripts will be read by at least two members of the editorial board and, barring unforeseen problems, authors will receive notice of the board's decision in six to eight weeks.

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In the fifteenth issue of *Border States*, six authors consider the intersections of history and memory with place and community. This issue begins and ends at the borders between Kentucky and Tennessee and between the white and black residents of our region. Steven T. Ryan leads off with a study of the Agrarian writer Allen Tate's racial ideology as shaped by his relationships with fellow Clarksvillians Thomas D. Mabry, a white liberal, and the African American teacher Joseph T. Keesee. The race line that Ryan explores reemerges at the state line at the end of this issue in the essay by Anne-Leslie Owens and Carroll Van West on South Guthrie, Tennessee. Readers may be familiar with another Guthrie north of the state line in Kentucky as the birthplace of another Agrarian, Robert Penn Warren, but Owens and West focus on the black community's expressions of its identity on South Guthrie's landscape.

Several of the articles presented here concern the connection between identity and memory. Lynn Nelson analyzes John Haywood's 1823 history of Tennessee as a narrative that recounted the state's early history as the exploits of common men fighting the British and Native Americans not for personal gain, but as object lessons in American democracy. Looking at Midway College in Kentucky, the state's only women's college, Roseanne Vaile Camacho explains how Midway's institutional memory of its founding as the Kentucky Female Orphan School has obscured the history of female leadership responsible for its transformation into a modern college.

Sarah J. Martin also addresses the ways that people inscribe historical memory on the landscape, examining the Daughters of the American Revolution's preservation and restoration of the Brainerd Mission cemetery, the last physical element left of the school where Congregationalist missionaries sought to assimilate Cherokee students. Turning away from memory, Jaime Woodcock focuses on the struggle to define place and identity as the Tennessee Valley Authority promoted electrification in the Tennessee Valley through campaigns that contrasted residents' traditional and allegedly backward homes with modern and allegedly superior ones.

These essays began as presentations at the forty-eighth annual meeting of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association at the Shake Village at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, and the forty-ninth annual meeting at Fall Creek Falls in Pikeville, Tennessee. We appreciate the support of the conference participants and our editorial board for bringing the scholarship presented here to a new audience of readers.

Mary S. Hoffschwelle and Ellen Donovan

Steven T. Ryan  
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In 1930 the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* appeared, and Allen Tate took his place at the center of an American cultural debate. The Agrarian position was an attempt to answer both the northern industrial capitalism that the Agrarians despised and the Marxist responses to capitalism that were gaining in popularity among young American intellectuals. The Agrarians offered a traditional southern model as an alternative following the collapse of industrial capitalism. From 1930-38, Allen Tate, after eschewing politics and his southern roots during his literary formative years (the 1920s), became a vociferous spokesperson for social reform based upon the traditions of southern culture.

A major problem for the Agrarians was their response to race. By touting traditional southern culture as the model for an American revival of agriculturally based values, the Agrarians, including Tate, promoted a modified caste system in which African Americans represented a primary labor force. With the exception of the essay by Robert Penn Warren, the Agrarians mostly sidestepped the significance of traditional social assumptions which required African Americans to substantially carry the weight of labor that permitted the maintenance of a working leisure class (educated, involved landowners) which the Agrarians presented as the pillar of high culture and high art.<sup>1</sup> Thus Allen Tate's views on race have been subject to examination and criticism since the 1930s. Tate's role as a later force in the establishment of the powerful critical movement called New Criticism only increased interest in his racial views, particularly with the targeting of New Criticism by virtually all post-structural critical movements. Thomas A. Underwood's biography, *Allen Tate, Orphan of the South* (2000), is blunt in its treatment of Tate's racist assumptions during the 1930s. These views would become an embarrassment for Tate in his later years.

My particular interest is in how two men from Clarksville, Tennessee, challenged Tate's racial assumptions in ways that clearly had an impact. Both men were talented and intellectually gifted, but their names and their lives have been lost beneath the grander reputations of such Clarksville area or "Black Patch" writers as Evelyn Scott; Allen Tate; his wife, Caroline Gordon; and their close friend, Robert Penn Warren.

Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon moved to Clarksville in 1930, the year *I'll Take My Stand* was published. With the aid of Tate's wealthy brother, Ben, they purchased a house originally built before 1831 on the Cumberland River and called it Ben's Folly, later shortened to Benfolly (Waters 24). They maintained possession of this house throughout the 1930s but actually lived in it only half of that time as their Clarksville residence was broken by European travel supported by a Guggenheim award and by teaching engagements. Their specific residence at Benfolly was 1930-32, 1933-34, and 1937-38.<sup>2</sup> During their years in Clarksville, Benfolly became a popular destination for many writers, including Ford Madox Ford, Katherine Anne Porter, Edmund Wilson, Robert Lowell, and the key writers involved in the Agrarian movement.

The two Clarksvillians who later influenced Tate's racial views first became associated with Tate in 1931. Thomas Dabney Mabry wrote an early review of *I'll Take My Stand* in which he opposed its conservative perspective (Hutchinson 14). Born in 1903, thus four years younger than Tate, Mabry came from a

southern aristocratic background and was educated at Harvard from 1921-1925. In a letter he recounts his shock at age sixteen when on his way to Harvard he stopped in Chicago to see Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* and was seated next to an African American. He first requested that his seat be changed; however, after watching Charles Gilpin's performance, he recognized the "absurdity" of his position and "was profoundly ashamed" (Hutchinson 14). After graduation he stayed in New York, working for Knopf publishing company and for an art museum specializing in modernism, until his father died in 1929. *I'll Take My Stand* had a profound effect on Mabry who "felt impelled to make a stand against the reactionary selfishness of the New Agrarians" (Hutchinson 14) and thus returned to the South where he accepted a graduate fellowship at Vanderbilt, the citadel of the Agrarian movement.

A confrontation between Mabry and Tate occurred in 1932 precipitated by Langston Hughes' visit to James Weldon Johnson's writing program at Fisk University in Nashville. Mabry had previously met Johnson in New York and wanted to work with Johnson who had recently joined Fisk University. Mabry planned a party at which he intended to introduce Johnson and Hughes to the Vanderbilt literary community. Tate not only rejected the invitation, he also objected to the party on racial grounds and encouraged others to boycott. In his letter to Mabry, he argued that such a meeting would be acceptable in New York, London, or Paris, but in Nashville would be "ambiguous." To defend his position, he offered the following interpretation of racial relationships: "there should be no social intercourse between the races unless we are willing for that to lead to marriage. This interesting theory is not original with me. It was expounded to me by the colored man who milks our cow . . . . These unfortunate limitations of the social system we must expect to be removed only in heaven where there are no distinctions of color and no marriage or giving in marriage" (Hutchinson 13). The African American here referred to as "the colored man who milks our cow" was, as I will demonstrate later, Joseph T. Keesee, who would become a prominent educator and leader in the Clarksville African American community and would later ironically be presented by Tate as the individual who inspired his personal rejection of segregationist theories. Tate's letter to Mabry is surprisingly inconsistent in its logic as it first introduces a moral relativism (what is acceptable in New York is not acceptable in Nashville), and then reverses such relativism and argues with an absolutist syllogism: (1) racial mixing is not acceptable without the acceptance of interracial marriage, (2) interracial marriage is categorically unacceptable, (3) therefore, racial mixing is unacceptable. Note the emphasis Tate (in the 1930s) places on miscegenation as the central taboo that underlies his segregationist views. This will resurface in his 1933 explanation for his segregationist position and later play a prominent role in his only novel *The Fathers* (1938).

Tom Mabry, who considered Tate a friend, was infuriated by Tate's letter. He responded with a letter to Tate in which he exposed Tate's duplicity:

Doubtless you would include yourself among those Southerners who could find it possible to sneak into the nauseous parties certain foolish people give in New York, London, and Paris where negroes are invited merely because it is considered smart. Such parties I do not attend. To do so would be a patronage of the negro intolerable to any person having the least respect for him. . .

Whether or not marriage will be the "solution" I do not know. Certainly a more vicious assimilation is going on because of the attitudes of people like yourself. (Hutchinson 13)

Mabry's letter is vehement in its chastising of Tate, and surprisingly Tate responded to Mabry with an admission of "moral lassitude" and with the hope that he could remain Mabry's friend (Hutchinson 13). It is as though Tate knew he had placed himself in a dubious position, but it was a position to which he would cling at least during the 1930s.

Tom Mabry would in a sense remain friends with Allen Tate, although his closer relationship was with Caroline Gordon. He continued to correspond with them through the years and later became Gordon's student and collaborator (Waldron 301). Although opposed to the racial underpinnings of Tate's and Gordon's Agrarian politics, he was more truly Agrarian than either of them. Even in his Vanderbilt years he was contemplating a return to farming. The Vanderbilt years remained troubling for Mabry as the head of the English Department, Edwin Mims, also objected to Mabry's socializing with Johnson, and his problems increased when he attempted to combine professional activities at Vanderbilt and Fisk. Events reached a crisis early in 1933 when Mabry was told by Mims that maintaining his social relationships with African Americans would lead to his repudiation by Vanderbilt students, and Mabry gave up his fellowship at Vanderbilt (Hutchinson 16). Obviously, Tate's segregationist position was far more prevalent than Mabry's integrationist position. Much of Mabry's history at this time has come to light because of his close friendship with the newly revived African American novelist, Nella Larsen, and the valuable work of Larsen's biographer, George B. Hutchinson.<sup>3</sup>

Mabry is also deserving of a revival of interest despite his rather limited literary production. Like Larsen, he devoted much of his life to other activities, but he was a perceptive and talented fiction writer. He divided his time between farming and working for the Museum of Modern Art in New York as its director (Clark 219, footnote), the Office of War Information, and Time, Inc. His first published story appeared in "*Best Short Stories of 1949*." Another story received first prize in the O. Henry Awards of 1954, and a third story was reprinted in the "*Best Stories of 1957*." Mabry was married and had two children and returned to full-time farming near Allensville, Kentucky, in 1957. He committed suicide in 1968. His stories along with the stories of Ward Dorrance were published in 1959 in *The White Hound* by the University of Missouri Press with an introduction by Caroline Gordon. Not included in this collection is his more racially involved fiction including a fine story called "Big Minnow" published in *Space* in 1934. He also left an unfinished manuscript of a novel set in the rural South and treating the topic of miscegenation.<sup>4</sup> Although the introduction by Gordon testifies to the benefit of his association with Tate and Gordon, one may also speculate that his literary career suffered from racial ideas that have proven prophetic but that were unpopular within his segregated society.

The impact of Thomas Mabry on Allen Tate is apparent in Tate's most famous segregationist proclamation from the 1930s. In May of 1933, Tate responded in a letter to a request from Lincoln Kirstein, the publisher of *The Hound & Horn*, to explain his position on race. Tate never published the material either its original form as a letter or revised as an essay, and later in life he attempted to keep this letter out of print. Within the letter, Tate offered a lengthy analysis of his segregationist position. The argument is essentially in two parts: the first part focuses on power politics and the second part on miscegenation. The connection between the two parts is tenuous as the miscegenation issue is introduced as "one exception to the ordinary course of law" (Greenbaum 147).

The first half of the argument is based entirely upon an interpretation of natural law—that is, who is in power and how to maintain order through power. Although Tate identifies blacks as an "inferior race," he claims that his position would be the same even if white Americans were dealing with the Chinese who are a "superior race" (145). Tate claims that power is paramount because "not social justice but social order is key to the situation, and to maintain order between two races one race must rule" (146). Power permits legal justice for the ruling race, but for the subordinate race legal justice is contingent upon the maintenance of

order. If order is threatened, then the subordinate race loses legal justice. Thus Tate blames outside agitators, namely northern liberals and communists, for a threat to legal justice for blacks in the South (146).

He goes on to argue that the degree of racial problems in the South varies based upon the proportion of blacks since a large proportion threatens the cultural order more significantly than a small proportion. He uses Montgomery County, Tennessee, as an illustration of legal justice maintained without lynching because of a small black population and uses lynching in the nearby railroad town of Guthrie, Kentucky (Warren's birthplace), as a contrast based on equal populations of blacks and whites aggravated by economic tensions (147). The argument here is very Darwinian and also suggests why Tate flirted with fascism during the 1930s although he pulled back from Stewart Collins, publisher of *Bookman* and *The American Review* and an eventually professed fascist, before being pulled too deeply into Collins' political agenda (Underwood 210 & 241). At this point we must keep in mind that in the 1930s with the failure of capitalism, American intellectuals bifurcated between the poles of fascism and communism.

The second half of Tate's argument, a diatribe against miscegenation, is even more strident in its analysis of race and power. His basic argument is that the South's restrictions on the sexuality of the black man are justified because the ultimate "evil and pollution" is "a white woman pregnant with a negro child" (147). Tate makes a distinction between a white man impregnating a black woman and a black man impregnating a white woman. Although both cases "in fact" constitute white blood "passed into the negro race," Tate argues that a black man impregnating a white woman introduces a greater "threat to white racial integrity" (147). He gives three quick explanations for this distinction: (1) "it is upon the sexual consent of women that the race depends for the future," (2) "it is also a question of moral symbolism;" and (3) "it is based upon the psychology of sex and of maternity" (147). He explains moral symbolism as the requirement "that the source of life [apparently referring to white women] shall not be polluted" (147). In regard to the psychology of sex, he claims that "a man is not altered in his being by sexual intercourse" whereas "the body of a woman is powerfully affected by pregnancy" (147). Therefore, in Tate's view, "a white woman pregnant with a negro child becomes a counter symbol, one of evil and pollution" (147). With the loss of the old social order, women are reduced to "something to have sexual intercourse with." With sex equated to "satisfying desire," a "fashionable sexual cult" which Tate describes as "an immitigable evil" becomes associated with the black race (147).

Here Tate seems to be referring to the 1920s jazz-age surge of African American popularity associated with sexual vitality, and it is through this primarily urban-based phenomenon that Tate returns to his argument that the improvement of black lives (and white lives) can only occur through a restoration of traditional agricultural values. He blames the depression of agriculture on the "money made by industrialists at the expense of agriculture" (148). Then Tate argues that industrialists introduce "humanitarian projects" to save "the negro from the poor white, whose poverty has been largely created by the industrialists" (148). To Tate, the economic salvation of African Americans should be through the prosperity of southern agriculture (148). In contrast, he sees the "humanitarian projects" as foolish attempts to educate "a small minority of negroes to unfit them for life as it is lived. The money taken from the negro by means of the discrimination against agriculture is used to teach Vergil and the Romantic Poets to a minority of his brethren" (148).

The thought of such advanced liberal arts education, something Tate associated with the southern aristocracy, now being offered to a minority of African Americans became the catalyst for Tate's renewed

attack upon his fellow Clarksvillian, Tom Mabry. He concludes his argument with the following jab at Mabry: "We have a few aesthetes like Tommy Mabry who see glory in this program because every negro is a suppressed genius" (148). This reference to Mabry obviously alludes to Tate's confrontation with Mabry over Mabry's party and to Mabry's connection with Fisk University, an institution supported in part by the philanthropy of white industrialists and a private institution that emphasized a liberal arts education for future African American professionals. That Tate would dismiss Mabry as an "aesthete" is curiously ironic given that Tate's tendency both within his early Fugitive phase and within his late formalist phase was to disassociate the appreciation of literature from politics and economics, thus aligning him in the minds of many with both elitism and "art for art's sake." However, since he had taken an aggressive political position, Tate felt justified for the moment in dismissing Mabry, whose political views were seen by Tate as far too idealistic, as an "aesthete." Within a lengthy segregationist argument that otherwise avoids personalities, Tate could not resist this final attack on Mabry's liberalism. I suspect what underlies this attack is Tate's emerging discomfort with his own argument. Mabry represented for Tate a tension within what he preferred to see as an intellectual southern view in clear opposition to northern industrialism, humanitarianism, and communism. Mabry spoke as a fellow southern gentleman from a background more appropriately representative of the southern aristocracy than Tate's own background, yet Mabry was in direct opposition to virtually every segregationist justification Tate had presented within his letter. The best Tate could do was to dismiss Mabry as an anomaly—as a mere "aesthete" lost in the otherwise harmonious voice of the traditional South.

A significant change in Tate's racial views became apparent by 1950. In Tate's biography, Underwood notes three events in the early 1950s that reveal this change: (1) Tate's introduction to the poetry collection of Melvin Tolson, a collection called a "Literary Emancipation Proclamation" for black American writers, (2) Tate's 1951 long poem entitled "The Swimmer" with its flashback to his memory of a lynched black man in Kentucky forty years earlier, and (3) his participation in a two-day civil rights forum in 1959 at which he expressed his support of Martin Luther King's campaign to establish African American voting rights (Underwood 293-94). By 1965 his article in *Spectator* (April 9, 1965) marked a clear break from his 1930s segregationist position. Tate denounced the segregationist politics of Alabama governor George Wallace and Mississippi governor Ross Barnett. The Confederate flag that he had once displayed prominently at Benfoly, he now saw used at sporting events as a contemptible racist symbol: "There is no dignity in displaying it as a symbol of the oppression of the Negro. It once stood for the best of the South; it now stands for the worst" (Underwood 295).

Toward the end of his life, Tate was increasingly embarrassed by his 1930s segregationist arguments, telling Daniel Aaron, "I had hoped that no one would dig up my early opinions for I have not held them for about forty years" (Underwood 296). To Aaron, Tate later emphasized his relationship with the second Clarksvillian who clearly had an impact on his racial views. According to Underwood, Tate told Aaron about "a certain experience" that produced "a complete reversal," and later said that this experience was "not unlike that of the man who saw the black at Smyrna and realized that he was a human being" (296). Tate explained this experience as his friendship with "an African American teacher named Joseph Kezee, who spent part of each year running a farm near Benfoly" (296). Tate was impressed that Kezee, who undertook "groundskeeping work in exchange for grammar lessons," spoke in "aristocratic" English quite unlike other southern blacks of his experience (296). Supposedly, Tate spent "a month or so tutoring Kezee, and before long the two men were addressing each other by their first names" (296). Interestingly, in his communication with Aaron, Tate again came back to the topic of miscegenation as he recalled asking Kezee

if he approved of miscegenation, to which Kezee responded, "no, neither in cattle nor in human beings" (296). Underwood notes that to Aaron, Tate dated this friendship in the summer of 1936 whereas Underwood dates it in 1931.

The African American referred to as Joseph Kezee is actually Joseph T. Keesee. The spelling in the biography is close to a phonetic spelling of the name. Before Tate's late-life correspondence with Aaron (1976), the two previous references to Keesee (although not by name) occur in Gordon's correspondence with Nancy Wood (1931) and Tate's letter to Mabry (1933) that refers to the "colored man who milks our cow" who supposedly rejected "social intercourse between the races unless we are willing for that to lead to marriage" (Underwood 13). Gordon's earlier description of this man leaves little doubt that they were referring to the same person:

We have the most remarkable milker, a negro school teacher. He and Allen have long talks. He seems to have thought on all the problems of the day and has a long, considered answer. The problem of race equality he dismisses by saying he has no use for any animal that isn't thoroughbred. He is rather moony and finally confessed that he sometimes wrote poems. He brought Allen one called "Sorrow" that wasn't bad, sort of Biblical in phrasing. (Wood 86)

Since both the 1931 and 1933 correspondence introduce the two factors of an African American who milks the cow and who is quoted as opposing racial mixing (most likely miscegenation although Gordon seems to equate this to opposing "race equality") on the basis of an association with animal breeding, there can be little doubt that the reference is to the same person. Since Gordon's letter describes Tate's "long talks" with the man who is a school teacher and speaks positively of his thoughtful responses and his "long, considered answers," this must also be the same teacher Tate describes in 1976 as having impressed him with his "aristocratic" English and as having developed a close relationship with this man, especially since his quoting of him on miscegenation (approving of it "neither in cattle nor in human beings") is so close to the statement in Gordon's letter ("no use for any animal that isn't thoroughbred").

Underwood notes that Tate's conversion argument is weakened by the fact that he dated his relationship with Keesee in 1936, which would be well after his confrontation with Mabry and his letter to Kirstein. The correspondence only assures us that Tate was having long talks with Keesee in 1931—thus *before* the two racially charged events. However, we cannot be certain that the Tate/Keesee relationship did not continue after 1931. Indeed, the 1932 letter to Mabry refers to Keesee in the present tense as "the man who milks our cow." However, Tate and Gordon were not living at Benfolly in 1936, the date given by Tate, although they did return to Benfolly in 1937-38. In 1976 Tate also describes the teacher as undertaking "some groundskeeping work in exchange for grammar lessons" whereas the previous references only state that he milked the cow. Either Tate altered the real situation, possibly because he saw some advantage in making Keesee a groundskeeper rather than a milker, or Keesee agreed to do other work for Tate and Gordon sometime between 1931 and 1938.

There are other reasons I am convinced the person referred to is Joseph T. Keesee. I can find no historical record of a Joseph Kezee in the area whereas Joseph T. Keesee was a devoted teacher of African American children across the Cumberland River, thus in the neighborhood of Benfolly during the 1930s. In fact his cousin, Rev. Robert E. Keesee, told me that Joseph was responsible for the education of virtually all of the black children in that region during the 1930s. Rev. Keesee describes his cousin as having been a "scholar of the first magnitude" and remembers Joseph as "a brilliant man". Furthermore, Joseph's daughter, Josephine Keesee-Gregory, has childhood memories of her father's acquaintance with Allen Tate.

Joseph T. Keesee was born in 1902 in what was then called the Bladen community. He died in 1970 at age 68. Keesee descended from the slaves of John and Ann Keesee who migrated from Virginia to Montgomery County, Tennessee, in 1816. The white descendants of John and Ann Keesee were prominent Clarksvillians during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their family included judges, bankers, farmers, and businessmen in the area. Following the pattern of the times, the emancipated slaves of the Keesee family assumed the name of their former owners. Early records of the Keesee family also indicate miscegenation, with mulattoes produced by the white plantation owners, although this is not confirmed after the migration to Clarksville.<sup>5</sup> Joseph T. Keesee lived most of his life on a road named after the Keesee family and near the cemetery that divided the ancestral white and black Keesees. Until the last years of his life, he lived in a segregated Clarksville. The normal school that became Austin Peay State University was not available to African Americans and even a good high school education was difficult to attain, so he completed high school and received his higher education in Nashville at the Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School, which later became Tennessee State University. There he excelled as a history major and returned to Clarksville to teach at the all-black Bladen Elementary School in what is now South Cumberland Heights. He was married in 1928, had three children, and was divorced in 1949.

In 1931, when Tate came to know him, he was on his summer break from teaching children from first to eighth grade at Bladen. Later in the 1950s he would teach at New Providence Colored School. A later prominent educator, Flora Richbourg, and one of Keesee's students at Bladen during the 1930s, Flora Richbourg credits Keesee as the major shaping force of her life. Under his influence she first became highly aware of her own speech and was frequently required to diagram sentences. According to Richbourg, he taught at a far more advanced level than was common in the Clarksville public schools and emphasized world geography and history. Richbourg recalls being required to trace precisely the route from Odessa to Leningrad (a hint of liberal ideas for the time), memorizing poems like "Thanatopsis," and learning much of African American history in conversation with Keesee. She also recalls that her mother liked to call Keesee "our black Jesus." According to Richbourg, Keesee maintained perfect order in the classroom yet would sing for the children and play ball with them during recess. Later in life, when Richbourg came to know Keesee as an adult, she learned that he suffered an extended illness as a young man and during that time did a great deal of reading. Keesee's daughter also recalls being introduced by her father to the literature of Langston Hughes at a young age and remembers her father writing at his desk frequently. Another cousin, Rev. Rubin Keesee, remembers Joseph as a very intellectual man who was far ahead of his time in his knowledge and interest in African and African American history and culture. Unfortunately, I have not discovered anyone in Clarksville who is aware that Joseph wrote poetry, and apparently his personal papers have not been preserved.

The African American Allen Tate came to know in 1931 was an unusually gifted man. Keesee's daughter referred to her father simply as "a thinker," probably the introspective equivalent of what Gordon meant by "moony." Keesee never became a professional writer, but, according to Richbourg, he continued his formal education in Nashville until 1945, apparently returning in the summers to continue his education, and devoted his life to the education of black children during a time in which segregation placed black children at a distinct disadvantage.<sup>6</sup> In his later years, according to retired educator Charles Goodrich, Keesee was a "stately man." He was a leader within the Clarksville black community, and all who have spoken of him have expressed admiration for his refinement and his intellect.

We cannot know to what degree Tate's racial views were changed through his relationship with Keesee. It does seem likely that Keesee prompted Tate to question his previous assumptions of the inferiority of the black race. Underwood justifiably doubts Tate's claim that through this relationship he went through a sudden conversion and was thereafter willing to accept African Americans as his equals. Although Mabry claims to have gone through such a conversion in Chicago at age 16, sudden conversions are probably rare and are less common for men in their 30s. Change more often occurs when an accumulation of information breaks down conventional dogma. Keesee's daughter, Josephine, recalls that her father had a favorite saying that he would often repeat to his children: "You are no better than anybody else and you're just as good as anybody else." This perspective, I suspect, would have been too egalitarian for Tate even in his later years. In regard to Keesee's view on miscegenation, his daughter said she could not recall him speaking on the subject, but she described him as a "strict" man and said that he believed in purebreds, refusing to let his bull be used to breed common stock.

Tate in his later years essentially managed to separate the issue of integration from his continued negative reaction to miscegenation, but even as a supporter of integration, he was a gradualist in regard to reform, still resented federal interference, and was repulsed by the black militancy of the 1970s (Underwood 294 & 406). For an elderly, southern man in the 1970s, his moderate integrationist position is as predictable as his segregationist position in the 1930s. However, what seems apparent is that both Mabry and Keesee did have some effect on Tate's racial views. In their contrasting ways both let Tate know that he could not cling to the assumptions of segregation. In regard to miscegenation, Tate probably remained very much a man of his time. In 1965, Erskine Caldwell's *In Search of Bisco* offered insight into the relationships between southern racism and miscegenation. In an interview style similar to Studs Terkel's books, this book offered a number of interviews in which the sexual anger and fear of white racists surface at the moment in history shortly before the Supreme Court eliminated state laws opposing mixed marriages. In his twisted argument on the threat of miscegenation, Tate provides an intellectualization of visceral reactions common throughout the South. This anger and fear often relates to the perceived obligation to preserve the cultural role and identity of the white woman. No doubt beneath this gallant posturing is a more primitive response to a sexual threat. Even late in life, the memory of Keesee's response to breeding provided Tate some comfort that this final bastion of racism need not crumble even as he presented Keesee as the justification for why he and the South must change.

Both Mabry and Keesee played some role in changes that took place in Tate's views between 1930 and 1938—his Benfolly period. During this time, Tate had formulated a reactionary political position within the larger debate of where America and the world were heading after the stock market crash of 1929. His enthusiasm for the Agrarian reform had faded by 1938, and he had taken many direct attacks as a racist and a fascist. His experiences with Mabry and Keesee at least aided Tate in modifying his extremist positions.

The shifting of Tate's position may help explain his problematic portrayal of Yellow Jim in his 1938 novel, *The Fathers*. Early in the novel, set in 1860, the treatment of Jim is central as George Posey first sells the slave who is his half-brother to buy a horse that he uses in a tournament to impress the woman, Susan Buchan, whom he hopes to marry. In the climax of the novel Yellow Jim is manipulated by Susan to rape a white woman although the novel, as many critics have observed, is quite unclear as to whether the rape actually occurs. Tate's comment on ambiguity in his letter to Donald Davidson fails to answer the simple question as to whether Yellow Jim raped Jane (Underwood 289). Thereafter, Yellow Jim is murdered by the woman's fiancé while George Posey watches, and then Posey oddly murders the fiancé, his brother-in-law.

Critical arguments concern whether the action is an indictment of slavery and the cultural decay derived from it or whether Tate continues to defend the old South and the codes on which it was based. I suspect the ambiguity which has received so much attention derives in part from Tate's conflicted state in 1938.<sup>7</sup> Although Tate liked to see this argument of the defense versus the condemnation of the old South as an illustration of the ineptitude of sociological critics (Underwood 290), I am more inclined to see Tate's ambiguity in this case as the result of a writer caught in transition between his deep fears of black man/white woman miscegenation and his growing realization of the grave injustices perpetrated against the black race by the southern culture. Davidson, who would remain an adamant segregationist, was bothered that Tate had played into the hands of Yankee liberals by introducing the mixed blood of Yellow Jim and by his treatment of the supposed rape (Underwood 289).

Tate felt a great need to enact the dramatic elements that he could not disassociate from his racial views. The confusion of responses that combines his fear of the black man's sexuality and his growing sympathy for the injustice historically committed against the black man left him with a climax in which the guilt or innocence of Yellow Jim is blurred and the killer of Yellow Jim, a traditional defender of the old order, is killed instantly with an impulsive act that goes without explanation.<sup>8</sup> In one of his late-life attempts to disassociate himself from his early racial views, Tate responded to Matthew Josephson's characterization of him as a man who rejected the modern culture for the "provincial traditions and the 'racial myths' of the Old South" (Underwood 295). Tate argued that the "delineation of the Negro hero, 'Yellow Jim,' of my novel *The Fathers*, would prove conclusively that I did not subscribe to any belief remotely resembling a 'racial myth'" (295). Yet his earlier statements hardly suggest that Yellow Jim is a "hero," and more than sixty years of criticism on this novel reveals far more confusion than clarity in regard to Yellow Jim and his fate. Ambivalence is an accurate reflection of Tate's portrayal of the African American. In 1938 Tate teetered between a liberal position that emphasized "the curse of slavery" and a conservative position that emphasized "the curse of miscegenation."

<sup>7</sup>*I'll Take My Stand* was somewhat divided between two visions, one based more on the South's inheritance of the British model of "Squirearchy" (Ransom 14) a name which Ransom preferred to aristocracy and the other based more on Lytle's vision of "the yeoman South" (Lytle 208). In both cases, the Agrarians favored a traditionally stratified culture but without land falling into the hands of an uninvolved small population that relied completely upon the labor of others.

<sup>8</sup>These dates are based on Ann Waldron's biography, *Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance* (New York: Putnam, 1987). They do not include other dates when Gordon and Tate stayed at Merry Mount, the home of Gordon's grandmother. At Benfolly, Tate and Gordon hoped to put their Agrarian theories into practice by living off the land to subsidize their literary incomes. The attempt failed due to poor land, a poor economy, Tate's writer's block, and excessive reliance on hired help.

<sup>9</sup>George B. Hutchinson, Booth M. Tarkington Professor of Literary Studies at Indiana University, has permitted me to use material from the manuscript copy of his biography on Nella Larsen. The biography, entitled *From the Shadows: The Life and Times of Nella Larsen*, is forthcoming. The above quotations are from chapter twenty, "The Crack-Up, 1932-33."

<sup>4</sup>This information is based upon previous conversations with Tom Mabry's daughter, Susan Menees.

<sup>5</sup>The above information is taken from *A History of the Keesee Family* by Vincent A. Keesee, privately printed in 1991 and available in the Clarksville Montgomery County Public Library.

<sup>6</sup>The *Bulletins* of A. & I. State College in the Special Collections at Tennessee State University indicate that Joseph Keesee was a high school student in summer of 1929-30, was a "special student" in 1935-36, and had attained senior college rank in Liberal Arts, History and Social Science in 1945-46. He is also listed in the *Tennessee State University Alumni Directory*, 2002, as one of 77 students in the class of 1945.

<sup>7</sup>Tate's comment on ambiguity in his letter to Donald Davidson fails to answer the simple question as to whether Yellow Jim raped Jane (Underwood 289). An astute treatment of this ambiguity is Lynette Carpenter's "The Battle Within: The Beleaguered Consciousness in Allen Tate's *The Fathers*," *Southern Literary Journal* 8.2 (1976): 3-23.

<sup>8</sup>Tate's explanation to Davidson relies heavily upon his desire to stay close to his ancestral history. According to Tate, a mulatto in his family "tried to assault one of the ladies" (a cousin) after "he heard her say she was afraid of him" (Underwood 289).

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#### TVA and Rural Electrification, 1933-1950s:

#### Motives, Methods, and Consequences for Rural Tennessee Valley People and Homes

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Today, most Americans do not give much thought to electricity and its importance in their daily lives. The lights simply turn on with the flip of a switch, and the hum of the refrigerator or washing machine serves only as part of the background noise in a comfortable modern home. But electric conveniences such as these, although available in many urban areas by the 1920s, became obtainable to the majority of rural residents in the southeastern United States only about fifty years ago.

While much of the country was stepping into the television age in the 1950s, many people in the Tennessee Valley area were just entering the electric age and were doing so through power generated by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Congress' establishment of TVA on May 18, 1933, during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and the electricity it would eventually generate meant the beginning of an imposing federal agenda that was intended to bring modern improvements to the area. It also signaled the beginning of the slow but nearly inescapable replacement of many aspects of the traditional rural southern home and culture with outsiders' standards of civilization. In the seven southeastern states it began servicing in the 1930s, TVA greatly contributed to the transformation of rural and isolated Tennessee Valley people and homes in that the independence and self-sufficiency which dominated the area for many generations began to evolve into the dependence and consumerism of which mainstream America had already become a part. So, while scholars have addressed the political, economic, and various other aspects of the New Deal and TVA in the South, few studies exist on how one modern advancement—electricity—affected the everyday workings of the rural home and, in turn, prodded the people of the Tennessee Valley area to abandon longstanding, although labor-intensive, traditions and embrace the modern idea of the productive, convenient, and comfortable American home and life.<sup>1</sup>

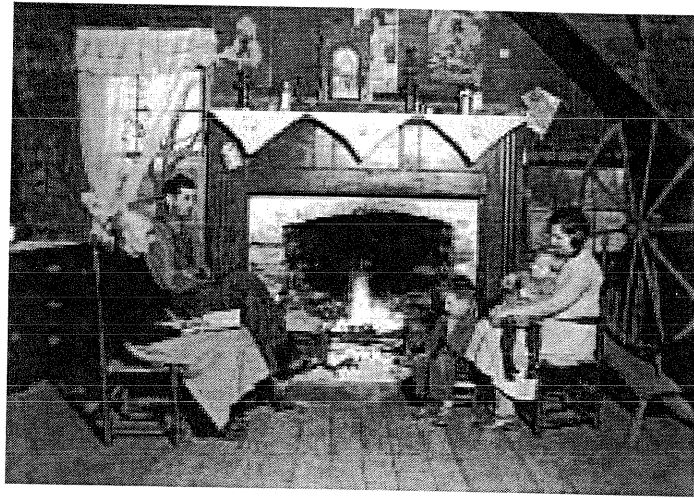
Maintaining and living in a Tennessee Valley area home before electricity was characterized by very hard work and minimal to no amenities. Describing a mountain home outside Chattanooga at the beginning of the twentieth century, the author and artist Emma Bell Miles wrote:

There are three wooden four-poster beds in the main room, every one occupied at night, and every one covered with the intricately pieced and quilted comforts of which the humblest cabin boasts a few. . . . There are three or four chairs bottomed with white-oak splints, one rocker, one rude table and some faded homespun rugs; there is a clock on the fireboard, flanked by a bottle of whiskey and a box of seeds; and that is positively all.<sup>2</sup>

Like many homes in the region during the first decades of the twentieth century, especially those isolated by intense mountain terrain, the fireplace was this cabin's oven and stove. Hot coals were spread underneath and on top of the lid of a heavy cooking vessel just as many generations before had done.<sup>3</sup> For those who had greater access to towns and the means to purchase items for the home, wood stoves were often used. Although slightly more modern than the primitive methods of cooking over the fireplace, the wood stove still depended on a steady supply of wood and still did not offer the luxuries of regulating cooking temperatures or leaving the fire unattended. So, the wood stove was an advancement over the open fire in appearance more than utility.



Home of Mrs. Jacob Stooksbury, Loyston, Tennessee. Photograph by Lewis W. Hine. November 23, 1933. National Archives and Records Administration. Courtesy New Deal Network.



The lack of refrigeration in pre-electric rural homes was another feature that affected the everyday lives of people in the Tennessee Valley area. Milk and other spoilable products were stored in the cool waters of a springhouse that was often over a hundred yards from the house, and meat, usually pork, had to either be eaten immediately or slaughtered in the fall and smoked or salted to be preserved for later use. Also, the summer and early fall months meant an even harder workload for women in the home. From June through September, fruits and vegetables quickly ripened, and women had to toil tirelessly in order to can and preserve the valuable foodstuffs before they rotted.

Before electricity, simply getting water to the home so that daily duties could be performed was a chore. The water used to cook, can, clean, and, when time and energy permitted, bathe had to be carried in by buckets after being hand pumped from a well or collected from a spring. It then had to be heated which required hauling in wood for the fire. Washday, for instance, required many gallons of water, thorough scrubbing with what was usually homemade lye soap, and standing over a large pot of boiling water, stirring the clothes with a long piece of wood, like a broom handle, for several minutes to get them clean. Rinsing the clothes out took even more time, water, and effort. Next came ironing the clothes with heavy wedges of iron that were rotated on and off the wood stove so that they kept their heat. Because they were heated on the wood stove, irons frequently collected soot and, if not cleaned often, could easily ruin the hard work of washday. Of course, the absence of indoor plumbing also forced rural home dwellers to use outhouses, regardless of weather conditions. Needless to say, the shortage of an easily accessible and usable water supply in the rural homes of the Southeast was just one facet of a difficult life of labor and inconvenience, especially for women.

In addition to the many and varied chores of everyday life in a rural Tennessee Valley home, the lack of electric light limited the amount of time in a day in which tasks could be performed. Kerosene or “coal oil” lamps cast only a dim light and were not usually plentiful enough in a home for family members to have their own for the purposes of reading or working. Given the intense work required every day, sleep often came early and reading was seldom a primary objective in the rural homes of the Tennessee Valley

area. Survival and maintaining the best quality of life possible under the circumstances of the region generally meant that rural people and homes, even into the mid-twentieth century, were closely aligned to the traditions of the several generations that preceded them.



Washday, Stooksbury Homestead. Photograph by Lewis W. Hine. October 23, 1933. National Archives and Records Administration. Courtesy of New Deal Network.

By the 1930s, the pre-electric home conditions of the Tennessee Valley area were a point of discussion among many of the country’s educated elite. Senator George W. Norris of Nebraska, a major proponent of TVA and, later, the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), recalled:

I had seen first-hand the grim drudgery and grind which had been the common lot of eight generations of American farm women. . . . I could close my eyes and recall the innumerable scenes of the harvest and the unending punishing tasks performed by hundreds of thousands of women, growing old prematurely; dying before their time; conscious of the great gap between their lives and those whom the accident of birth or choice placed in the towns and cities. Why shouldn’t I have been interested in the emancipation of hundreds of thousands of farm women?

Apparently, Norris viewed those without electricity, who continued to toil in much the same manner as their ancestors, as being enslaved, and he was not alone. Authors in educational journals of the mid-1930s wrote to the people of the Tennessee Valley that introducing TVA and electricity to the area would make them “forward-looking where now you stand upon the traditions of a musty past; free where you are now enslaved by a brutal land economy,” and they debated among themselves whether or not “these cove-dwellers should be moved out.”<sup>5</sup> Not only were the rural people of the region seen as slaves to an outdated land-based economy, but they were also seemingly not fit to make their own decisions about their own lives and futures.

Lorena Hickok, who wrote reports on the state of the nation for the Federal Emergency Relief Agency during the Depression, pondered, in 1934:

What to do with these people makes a nice little problem. Whether to move them off—and, if so, where to put them—or, on table land, for instance, where with careful and authoritative supervision they might eke out a living, leave them there and take a chance on their being absorbed in the industries that should be attracted down here by the cheap power furnished by TVA.<sup>6</sup>

The living conditions of the rural residents of the Tennessee Valley degraded them, in the eyes of the federal government, to the point that their land and homes were seen as needing the constant supervision of a more suitable entity—TVA. Outsiders saw the South in the 1930s as a place “where the mode of material existence is not different from that of the first settlers, over a century and a half ago.”<sup>7</sup> So, whether they knew it or not, those who lived in the Tennessee Valley during the New Deal were viewed by many educated and influential urbanites as living in “the grey shadows of want and squalor and wretchedness,” and, as part of the New Deal’s social experiment, one of TVA’s responsibilities was to lift these rural people and, in turn, their descendents up to federal standards of civilization.<sup>8</sup>

David Lilienthal, one of TVA’s three original directors, wrote of the Tennessee Valley, “A thousand valleys over the globe and our valley here are in this way the same: everywhere what happens to the land, the forests, and the water determines what happens to the people.”<sup>9</sup> Frequent floods along the Tennessee River, infertile and eroding farmland due to misuse and massive deforestation, expensive or nonexistent electric service, and an extremely low level of material wealth among Tennessee Valley residents were a few of the primary reasons for the establishment of TVA. In the eyes of Lilienthal and many other TVA supporters, the people of the Tennessee Valley had been abused and neglected just like the land around them, so the area offered the perfect place for an experiment in regional planning and resource development.

In section twenty-three of the TVA Act, Congress included “the economic and social well-being of the people living in the said river basin” as one of its general purposes.<sup>10</sup> Like many people of the time, Stuart Chase, a prominent economist and member of FDR’s “Brain Trust,” believed, “This last provision was perhaps too frank. . . . It comes perilously close to stating what the act was really designed for. It is bad form and bad law to consider the social well-being of two million people scattered over seven states.”<sup>11</sup> In a paper read before the American Sociological Society six months after the publication of Chase’s remarks in 1936, TVA Director Arthur E. Morgan argued/responded:

The public of America quite generally has the impression that the Tennessee Valley Authority was given a charter with far-reaching powers to plan and to work out the social and economic reconstruction of a great region. That is far from the case. . . . In two brief sections of the TVA Act, the power conferred to make studies, experiments, and demonstrations in the direction of social and economic planning. Beyond that the powers and duties of the Authority are quite definitely prescribed. They include bringing about the unified control of the Tennessee River System for navigation, flood control, and power.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of whether or not Congress and TVA vocalized their paternalistic intentions on the matter of social uplift and reform in the region, all involved with the project knew its social implications and hoped to change the Tennessee Valley and its people forever. Reformers intended federally administered electricity to be the catalyst that could transform the rural population of the Tennessee River basin from a downtrodden lot still holding onto an unnecessarily difficult traditional life into a group of people existing on par with mainstream and modern America. This was illustrated again through Morgan’s address when he spoke of electricity:

This, as I say, is not just another product on the market; it represents one of the most fundamental revolutions in human history. The craving of men for release from the drudgery of manual labor demands that the fulfillment of that hope shall not be unnecessarily delayed, neither shall it be encumbered by manipulation and exploitation for private profit. One of the incidental aims of the Tennessee Valley Authority is to help bring about the time when electric power shall be universally available, and at such low rates that it can be used for a multitude of purposes, and not simply for the luxury of lighting homes.<sup>13</sup>

Electricity was so “fundamental” to modern human civilization and the alleviation of “drudgery” that it had to be introduced into the poor rural homes of the Tennessee Valley area in order to save them from their “wretchedness.” Congress created the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) to bring the wonders of electricity not only to the Tennessee Valley but also to rural America in general. After Roosevelt’s executive order on May 11, 1935, the REA was responsible for providing loans to private companies, public agencies, or rural cooperatives for the purposes of constructing rural power lines and wiring homes and farms.<sup>14</sup> Because private utility companies saw little financial benefit in extending power lines to isolated rural homes and communities, only 10 percent of rural areas in America were equipped with power lines and the means to use them at the time the REA was formed. But in the Southeast, with both TVA and the REA’s presence being felt by the mid-1930s, some rural folks began to realize that obtaining electricity was possible. Through speeches by leaders like Director Lilienthal and word-of-mouth, southeastern farmers and citizens learned that electric lines could be run to their farms and homes if they established rural electric cooperatives and applied to the REA for loans.<sup>15</sup> Slowly but surely, dams were completed along the Tennessee River, and powerhouses began creating an abundant supply of hydroelectric power.

In addition to increasing the overall convenience of the rural home, leaders of TVA and the REA hoped electricity would stem the exodus of rural youth that characterized the 1910s and 1920s and caused concern over the stability of both rural and urban areas. REA Administrator Morris L. Cooke noted in 1935, “The promise of continued drudgery and the absence of modern comforts have helped drive from the farm to the city those who were most free to travel but who were at the same time most needed in rural communities—the young people.”<sup>16</sup> After the Depression struck the nation in 1929, many rural people who immigrated to larger towns or urban areas in the previous decades in search of a better material existence returned home unemployed and in need of food and shelter.<sup>17</sup>

Even the rural people of the Tennessee Valley who had left the country for work in nearby small towns often returned to the old home place during the Depression in the hopes of farming again. Elmer Welch of the Flat Top community in the Cumberland Mountains just north of Chattanooga, Tennessee, remembered: “My dad worked on the Southern Railroad in Daisy when we moved back in the Depression in 1932. He was a section hand. He worked about ten years before he left there.”<sup>18</sup> When Mr. Welch’s hopes of securing a higher level of material existence for his family through wage labor were defeated by the Depression, he returned with his family to the way of life they had known before—farming. While most homes of the rural Tennessee Valley area were not yet anywhere near being equipped with the amenities of urban living, finding food and clothing was usually not a problem. Phyllis Killian of Sale Creek, Tennessee, recalled, “We were never cold or hungry. . . . They [female family members] made their own hominy. And she [her mother] always canned four or five hundred cans of vegetables a summer for the winter. . . . And we always had eggs and butter.”<sup>19</sup> So, while cities and towns offered the allure of better living before the Depression, during the economic downturn of the 1930s, rural areas offered survival, with or without

electricity, in much the same way as had been done for generations. Rural living meant backbreaking work and nothing fancy, but it also meant keeping the dignity of independence and self-sufficiency.

By the late 1930s, TVA, the REA, and appliance manufacturers had created a united front to prove to the people of the Tennessee Valley area that they needed, wanted, and could have electricity and all its domestic devices. Of course, little persuasion was necessary for people from more urban areas or members of the rural population who lived on the better-off farms. But many rural people of the TVA area worried about becoming indebted to the federal government.<sup>20</sup> To get electricity and all its conveniences, a rural customer had to pay the five-dollar sign-up fee to the local rural electric cooperative, the price of appliances, and TVA's rates for power consumption. Director Lilienthal remembered that TVA set its rate structure at about half the price of the private utility companies' previous rates based on the assumption that people wanted power and the only thing that stood in their way was its price.<sup>21</sup>

Although TVA cut power prices drastically, there were still many poor rural families in the Tennessee Valley area with absolutely no money to spend. According to Hickok's 1934 investigation in Tupelo, Mississippi, stoves and electric refrigerators ranged in price from \$80 to \$137 and hot water heaters ranged from \$60 to \$95.<sup>22</sup> The cheaper models were made available through an agreement between the manufacturers and TVA.<sup>23</sup> Despite the lower prices, in an area of the country where the per capita income was only about 40 percent of the national average in the mid-1930s,<sup>24</sup> that amount of money was nearly impossible to find without going into debt. However, debt slowly became more acceptable to the rural families that saw advertisements and various other media proclaim electricity to be vital to living a "real life" in modern America.

To demonstrate the value of their services and wares to a materially poor and largely self-sufficient yet overworked group of people in the Tennessee Valley, TVA, the REA, and appliance manufacturers emphasized the inferiority of the traditional rural home. TVA placed Lewis Hine's photographs of washday and other facets of daily life at the Stooksberry Homestead near Andersonville, Tennessee, in newspaper articles about the Norris Dam project. Women were shown in bonnets stooping over washtubs and boiling clothes in large pots outside an old log cabin, and some residents remembered people getting upset over the ideas of mountain life and people that were being presented to the public.<sup>25</sup> "If it had all been spic and span and beautiful buildings, well, it wouldn't have been interesting to anybody," remarked Herbert Stooksbury of the Norris Dam area.<sup>26</sup> TVA wanted to illustrate the primitive conditions of rural life in the Tennessee Valley so that it could show the larger American population and, later, rural residents its social benefit to the area. In an effort to gain and keep public approval, TVA's initial target audience often seemed to include city or town dwellers more than rural residents, but practical reasons were also a factor. High rural illiteracy rates, intense workloads, and rural isolation made many Tennessee Valley residents difficult customers to find and persuade. Despite this, TVA, as well as the REA and appliance manufacturers, continued to market their products and the idea of the modern home to whomever would listen.

TVA and the REA advertised the improvements that electricity could bring to home life through publicizing "before and after" photographs and motion pictures. A simple "before" photograph shows a woman washing clothes outside with cumbersome buckets and tubs, while an "after" shot shows a woman inside her home with a water faucet to fill her electric washing machine and a water heater nearby to warm the water with ease.<sup>27</sup> Another popular display was the photograph of a woman stooping to stuff her wood stove full of wood versus a woman pulling a pie from her electric oven with hands covered by oven mitts



Woman with Old Gas Oven.  
Rural Electrification Administration.  
Franklin D. Roosevelt  
Presidential Library. Courtesy  
New Deal Network.

that conveniently match her dress.<sup>28</sup> One motion picture advertisement for TVA contrasted troubled and frustrated-looking women washing with a washboard, battling an out-of-control fire in the wood stove, carrying in items stored in the springhouse, and ironing using heavy wedges of metal with pleasant-looking women effortlessly using their electric appliances that were powered by TVA electricity identified by its symbol of a fist holding a lightning bolt on the side of an electric shirt press.<sup>29</sup>



Woman with New Electric Range.  
Rural Electrification Administration.  
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential  
Library. Courtesy New Deal  
Network.

Appliance manufacturers went to even greater lengths to portray the inferiority of traditional rural living and the superiority of the modern and sophisticated home in their advertisements. Graybar-Crawford told women that its electric range "eliminates all the drudgery from cooking," but General Electric's series of advertisements in *Survey Graphic* magazine was much more dramatic.<sup>30</sup> Each advertisement featured an illustrative photograph on one half of the page and dialogue and explanations on the other half with some clear goal in mind. In 1938, General Electric ran an advertisement depicting a boy and his mother looking

through old items in the attic. According to the text, when the boy asks, “Gee, Mom, Were They All Poor People?” the mother explains that they were not poor, it was just that electricity was not yet around for the people to use.<sup>31</sup> But, by 1938, many people in the United States had electrified homes, and those who did not usually were considered poor, just as the boy suggested. Other advertisements warned to “Be Careful of the Candle, Son!” and asked readers, “Is YOUR HOUSE a Museum Specimen?”<sup>32</sup> The agenda of these ads seemed to be to cause readers and potential customers to feel shamed, excited, or scared into purchasing items and changing their homes in order to meet what was quickly becoming the American ideal—a clean, safe, comfortable, convenient, and, in short, electric home.



Woman Washing by Hand. Rural Electrification Administration. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Presidential Library. Courtesy New Deal Network.

Woman with Electric Washer. Rural Electrification Administration. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library. Courtesy New Deal Network.



Just as the need for electricity in the American home was illustrated through advertisements, the desire for power service in the rural Tennessee Valley was dramatically portrayed on the stage through the Federal Theater Project’s Living Newspaper production of Arthur Arent’s play, *Power*. An agency of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) which was designed to employ out-of-work actors and theater workers, the Federal Theater Project’s productions of *Power* promoted the goals of TVA beginning in 1937 on stages in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland, Oregon. The prologue of Act One, Scene Fifteen begins with a backdrop of movies of the Tennessee Valley and an announcement over the loudspeaker:

In the Tennessee Valley . . . parts of seven States, 40,000 square miles, two million people. All living in a region blighted by the misuse of land, and by the wash of small streams carrying away the fertile topsoil. In these cabins, life has changed but little since some pioneer wagon broke down a century ago, and for them this became the promised land. Occupations—when they exist at all—are primitive, a throwback to an earlier America. Here stand the results of poor land, limited diet, insufficient schooling, inadequate medical care, no plumbing, industry, agriculture or electrification!<sup>33</sup>

Scene Fifteen-A depicts a farmer and wife in a room dimly lit by a kerosene lamp. He is reading, and she is measuring a sock to his foot. After the wife complains that her husband cannot read in such a light, they discuss the chances of getting electricity out to their farm. He tells her that the power companies will not extend the lines, and she responds a few lines later:

WIFE: Light’s just as important as air.

FARMER: Sure it is, but . . .

WIFE: Don’t “but” me! Why don’t you go out and do somethin’ about it?

FARMER: Nora, if they don’t want to string lights out to my farm I can’t make ‘em.

(FARMER rises.)

WIFE: Who said you can’t? Who says you can’t go up there and raise holy blazes until they give ‘em to you! Tell ‘em you’re an American citizen! Tell ‘em you’re sick and tired of lookin’ at fans and heaters and vacums and dish-washin’ machines in catalogues, that you’d like to use ‘em for a change! Tell ‘em. . . (She stops). . . What the hell do you think Andy Jackson you’re always talkin’ about would do in a case like this! (As he stands convinced she claps his hat on his head, and gives him a push) Now go on out and tell ‘em somethin’!<sup>34</sup>

In Scene Fifteen-C, the farmer visits the electric company manager, saying, “My God, I’ve got to have lights, I tell you!” and gets turned down for power service and leaves, saying, “By God, the Government ought to do something about this!” Scene Fifteen-E ends with an onstage celebration of the passage of the TVA Act and the singing of the highly idealistic “TVA Song.”<sup>35</sup>

*Power* was a powerful piece of propaganda for TVA in gaining the support of urbanites across the country but did nothing to promote the acquisition and use of electricity among the type of people they were portraying in these scenes. In fact, most of TVA’s early visual media efforts did not seem to be directed at the poor rural people of the Tennessee Valley at all. TVA used dramatic works like *Power* and motion picture advertisements to secure national support for its social uplift agenda. But, if rural Tennessee Valley residents did not read *Survey Graphic* and almost definitely did not see the Living Newspaper production of *Power*, they generally did get their dose of outside influences and opinions by visiting others or going to church and the store. So, with or without any exposure to various advertisements, by the late 1930s, the rural people of the Tennessee Valley area probably had a good idea of the vast differences between themselves and city and town dwellers and the opinions of outsiders. However, simply realizing that some

people in the city had new electric gadgets was usually not enough to convince many of the self-sufficient skeptics with little to no money to buy electricity and electric appliances when they had already lived so long without them.

By 1940, the REA had loaned TVA distributors over \$10.6 million, and only \$140,538 had been repaid.<sup>36</sup> Carrying electricity to about 74,000 rural customers, approximately 14,800 miles of rural distribution lines were operating by the close of the year, meaning one in seven farms was electrified.<sup>37</sup> Now that more rural homes were being wired for electricity, TVA set up the Electric Home and Farm Authority (EHFA) to assist rural citizens in purchasing electric appliances. Like the REA, the EHFA offered loans, at low-cost financing, of course, for people to buy appliances like electric refrigerators, ranges, and water heaters at the reasonable prices established by the EHFA and appliance manufacturers. Appliances were sold at local venues, like the power company or electric cooperative. The opportunity for rural folks to buy appliances on loan worked out well for local dealers who made over \$12.5 million in TVA's service area in 1940 alone.<sup>38</sup> That year, new electricity users bought 35,400 electric refrigerators, 12,600 electric ranges, 4,700 electric water heaters, 1,300 electric water pumps, 14,000 electric washers, and 188,400 unclassified items.<sup>39</sup>

Although TVA had made great gains in electrifying the rural areas of the Tennessee Valley, by 1940 still not even close to half the rural population was using its service. From TVA's beginning, its leaders realized that a rural education program was necessary to show the people the many and varied uses of electricity as well as to gain their support.<sup>40</sup> Educational program techniques began with group meetings held in the communities to be wired. Technicians, county agents, and other TVA employees used this time to display their various media of "before and after" and "right and wrong" advertisements.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the group meeting, TVA employed many other rural educational programs. Electro-demonstration farms were established as a way for neighbors to teach each other about electricity. The demonstrator was given assistance with installation and the opportunity to buy the appliances at a depreciated value at the end if he would pay for the demonstration's kilowatt-hours and maintenance costs.<sup>42</sup> State agricultural extension services also worked with TVA to present educational programs on rural electrification. In 1940, about 43,000 farm people and extension workers attended these programs in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee.<sup>43</sup> Southern land-grant colleges offered to rural women courses on the proper use and care of electric appliances in practice kitchens. TVA also started educating the younger generation of the rural Tennessee Valley by encouraging county agents to sponsor boys' groups specializing in electrical projects and vocational teachers to show high-school-aged farm girls how to prepare food using electric ranges.<sup>44</sup> There was also a permanent electrical showroom and exhibit in Chattanooga.<sup>45</sup> For most of these educational programs, the people had to travel a fair distance and were taught in an often uncomfortable classroom setting.

However, there was one TVA rural education program that more closely aligned itself with rural customs—the Great Electric Tent Show Revival and Jubilee. Bob Rice, who headed the Great Electric Tent Show Revival and Jubilee during the early 1950s, remembered that most farmers in the area did not get electricity until after World War II, and after they did get it, "they didn't know what to do with it."<sup>46</sup> To show the rural people in the region "what to do with it," Rice and about seven college boys set up huge tents down dirt roads and in empty fields. The program, which was co-sponsored by the Tennessee Valley Public Power Association, was an electric show that featured music from young musicians like country singer Buck Owens, popular politicians like Tennessee's Albert Gore, Sr., and demonstrations of how to put together

electric light fixtures, work electric appliances, and use them to keep food fresh, save time and effort, and, through electric water pumps, get indoor plumbing.<sup>47</sup> The Great Electric Tent Show Revival and Jubilee traveled extensively through the region with tents, music, speakers, and conversion in true evangelistic style, often drawing crowds of 1,200, until it disbanded in 1955. This educational program was probably more influential and successful than many others, which depended on classroom settings, because it approached the people in a more comfortable setting and style. Together, each attempt at educating the rural population on how electricity could remove the drudgery of the old traditional home moved the people closer to becoming mainstream American consumers.

Obviously, TVA advocated the introduction of nationwide consumption patterns in the rural areas of the Tennessee Valley. After all, the people were living in one of the most electrified areas of the country but still lagged decades behind most Americans' material existence. As more and more rural homes gained electric service and appliances, some rural women also gained "a few hours a week to engage in social activities."<sup>48</sup> These more affluent farmwomen participated in home demonstration clubs where they mingled with women of similar status and learned new homemaking skills.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the labor-intensive traditional homemaking methods were easily replaced by electric methods as some rural women climbed their way into middle-class society.

In contrast to the very limited number of rural Tennessee Valley homes that were equipped with all the amenities of modern electric life by 1950, most rural people resisted or simply could not afford the modernization efforts of TVA, the REA, and appliance manufacturers' advertisements and educational programs. When electricity was established in rural homes, lights and radios were the primary objects purchased for the house.<sup>50</sup> Elmer Welch remembered, "That was famous here on this mountain when you had a radio."<sup>51</sup> Other large and more expensive items just were not practical for most rural people in the region, especially when, in their minds, their parents' and grandparents' methods worked just fine and going into debt was not a favorable course of action.

By 1950, the per capita income of people in the Tennessee Valley had risen to 60 percent of the national average.<sup>52</sup> Although people of the region were still vastly behind the American norm in dollars earned, the figure had risen about 20 percent since TVA's arrival in 1933. A large contributor to the increased incomes was the fact that many rural counties lost much of their populations to the towns and cities that began to provide greater economic opportunities through wage labor. If TVA was not yet widely successful at modernizing the rural home, its cheap electricity was instrumental in the formation of southeastern industries and in prompting many young rural people to leave the old ways of the rural land economy for the new ways of the urban economy. Also, tenant farmers often had no choice but to move into wage labor as TVA and more affluent farm families acquired their land and homes. In consequence, many members of the rural class became members of the urban class, abandoned their traditional home life of self-sufficiency, and adopted the consumption trends of towns and cities. As more and more roads were built, even smaller farmers often made the commute to jobs in town, since smalltime farming was hardly profitable and merely subsisting was no longer considered suitable by modern American standards.

Electricity did not keep people on the farms as many TVA and REA leaders had hoped, but those who did remain in rural areas of the Tennessee Valley after gaining electricity began to see gradual yet significant changes in their lives and homes. Historian Melissa Walker noted the differences in the ways rural men and women responded to the changes:

Although women welcomed the arrival of electricity, modern roads, and education for their children, they resisted total dependence on wage labor by maintaining many of their traditional subsistence activities whenever possible. By contrast, men seemed to welcome the transition to a cash economy even as they resisted moving out of old mountain cabins and watching their children choose other ways of living.<sup>53</sup>

Regardless of reactions to the modernization of economies and homes, the changes were coming, not over night, but steadily and slowly. In turn, many rural homes of the mid-twentieth century in the Tennessee Valley had never really caught up to the rest of the country in terms of modernization. By 1954, the U. S. Department of Commerce reported only 46 percent of southern farms had indoor plumbing.<sup>54</sup> This statistic easily illustrates that, because of reasons like lack of money, fear of debt, technological resistance, and cultural preferences, most rural Tennessee Valley residents were in no hurry to bring their homes up to modern standards of civilization and, therefore, were still viewed by outsiders as backward hicks. They had been given access to electricity but failed to incorporate it into the everyday workings of the home, and now, with rural people being less isolated than ever before, they were more aware of outside expectations and attitudes toward themselves and their homes. Often the victim of outsiders' stereotypes, a traditionally proud group of people sometimes found themselves at odds with "city folk" as they struggled to retain long-established ways of living.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the people of the rural Tennessee Valley were able to survive using old methods like farming, hunting, livestock raising, sawmilling, moonshining, and housekeeping, and they were usually not hungry or cold; but they could never get rich. As the twentieth century progressed, modern America became more and more dependent on consumption. The more things you were able to buy, the better off you were. The goal was no longer simply feeding and clothing your family—it was to have electric washers, refrigerators, and all the modern conveniences of a capitalistic and materialistic society. While TVA intended its electricity to bring the region's rural people up to the level of the rest of the country, the majority of people resisted for decades but finally succumbed to the outside pressures of modernization, even at its high prices. When they finally purchased their electric appliances, they did see some social improvements, such as a diversified diet and better health and hygiene, but they were still behind mainstream America in the terms of material existence. Thus, TVA never truly accomplished its goal of socially uplifting the Tennessee Valley area's rural people to national standards, but it did facilitate the people's gradual abandonment of traditional homemaking skills for greater participation in America's consumer culture.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Douglas L. Smith, *The New Deal in the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); James C. Cobb and Michael V. Nomorato, *The New Deal in the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984); Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967); Carroll Van West, *Tennessee's New Deal Landscape: A Guidebook* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001); Herman C. Pritchett, *The Tennessee Valley Authority: A Study in Public Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1943); Thomas K. McCraw, *TVA and the Power Fight, 1933-1939* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1971); Preston J. Hubbard, *Origins of the TVA: The Muscle Shoals Controversy, 1920-1932* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1961); and Gordon R. Clapp, *The TVA: An Approach to the Development of a Region* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> Emma Bell Miles, *The Spirit of the Mountains*, with a foreword by Roger D. Abrahams and an introduction by David E. Whisnant (New York: J. Pott, 1905; reprint, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Richard A. Pence, ed., *The Next Greatest Thing* (Washington, D. C.: National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, 1984), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Allan Woods, "TVA and the Three R's," *Journal of Educational Sociology* (Jan. 1935): 292-93; and T. J. Woofler, Jr., "The Tennessee Basin," *American Journal of Sociology* (May 1934): 812.

<sup>6</sup> Lorena Hickok, Florence, Alabama, to Harry L. Hopkins, 6 June 1934, in "Letters from the Field: Lorena Hickok Reports on the State of the Nation," accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/lorena1.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [22 August 2003].

<sup>7</sup> Odette Keun, "Electric Appliances on the Farm," in *A Foreigner Looks at TVA* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1937), accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/tva/tva12.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [22 August 2003].

<sup>8</sup> Hickok, 6 June 1934, *New Deal Network*.

<sup>9</sup> David Lilienthal, *TVA: Democracy on the March* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1944; reprint, 1953), 2.

<sup>10</sup> U. S. Congress, *Tennessee Valley Authority Act of 1933*, sec. 23 (18 May 1933), accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/acts/us07.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [22 August 2003].

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Chase, "TVA: The New Deal's Best Asset, Part II. Broadening the Exchange Base," *The Nation* (10 June 1936), accessed from: *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [31 October 2003].

<sup>12</sup> Arthur E. Morgan, "Sociology in the TVA," *American Sociological Review* 2 (April 1937): 159, accessed from: <http://www.jstor.org> [22 Nov. 2003].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>14</sup> Morris L. Cooke, "Electrifying the Countryside," *Survey Graphic* (1935), accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/tva/cooke.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [22 August 2003].

<sup>15</sup> George C. Stoney, "A Valley to Hold To," *Survey Graphic* (1 July 1940), accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/survey/40c18.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [22 August 2003].

<sup>16</sup> Cooke, "Electrifying the Countryside."

<sup>17</sup> Gordon R. Clapp, *The TVA: An Approach to the Development of a Region* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 55.

<sup>18</sup> Elmer Welch of Soddy-Daisy, TN, interview by author, 6 June 2002, interview CT-HA 6-6-02, transcript, Cumberland Trail History Project, in the possession of author.

<sup>19</sup> Phyllis Killian of Sale Creek, TN, interview by author, 13 July 2003, interview CT-HA 7-13-03, transcript, Cumberland Trail History Project, in the possession of author.

<sup>20</sup> Pence, ed., *The Next Greatest Thing*, 82.

<sup>21</sup> David Lilienthal, in *The Electric Valley*, James Agee Film Project, 88 min., 1983, videocassette.

<sup>22</sup> Lorena Hickok, enroute, Memphis to Denver, to Harry L. Hopkins, 11 June 1934, letter, Hopkins Papers, box 66, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/hopkins/hop16.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [31 Oct. 2003].

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Tennessee Valley Authority, *Annual Report of the Tennessee Valley Authority* (Knoxville: Tennessee Valley Authority, 1950), 2.

<sup>25</sup> John Rice Irwin, "Washday at Stooksberry Homestead," in Michael J. McDonald and John Muldowny, *TVA and the Dispossessed: The Resettlement of Population in the Norris Dam Area* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/tva/tva02.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [31 Oct. 2003].

<sup>26</sup> As quoted in "The Oakdale School," in *ibid.*, accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/tva/tva07.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [31 Oct. 2003].

<sup>27</sup> Rural Electrification Administration, "Rural Electrification: Before and After," photographs, accessed from: <http://newdeal.feri.org/tva/tva27.htm>, *New Deal Network*, <http://newdeal.feri.org> [22 Aug. 2003].