

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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The T.V.A. Song

The T.V.A. Song
(Jean Thomas)

My name is William Edwards
I live down Cove Creek way.
I'm working on the project
They call the T.V.A.

"The Government begun it
When I was but a child;
But now they are in earnest
and Tennessee's gone wild.

"Just see them boys a-comin'
Their tool kits on their arm;
They come from Clinch and Holston
And many a valley farm.

"Oh, see them boys a-comin,
Their Government they trust;
Just hear their hammers ringing
They'll build that dam or bust.

"I meant to marry Sally
But work I could not find;
The T.V.A. was started
And surely eased my mind.

"Oh things looked blue and lonely
Until this come along;
Now hear the crew a-singin'

"The Government employs us,
Short hours and certain pay;
Oh things are up and comin',
God bless the T.V.A."

by Jean Thomas, 1939

A bit of background from Bob Fulcher, a Regional Specialist at Norris Dam State Park:

Jean Thomas was another folk song enthusiast of the 1930s who reported two more

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songs

praising the Norris project. Thomas, who had once worked as a Hollywood script girl, became notorious for her unabashed exploitation of the romanticized view of Appalachian culture.

Modern scholars have criticized her distortion of Appalachian culture, manipulation of traditional artists, and self-promotion.

(Kinda' reminds you of John Jacob Niles a bit, doesn't it?--PP)

Jean Thomas, in 1939, published a text that had already become, by far, the most distributed of the Norris songs. She claimed, in "Ballad Makin' in the Mountains of Kentucky," that she had heard "The TVA Song," many times in "various sections of the Kentucky mountains."

There is no corroborating evidence that "The TVA Song" ever spread among the people of Kentucky, but it did take on quite a life. In 1937 Thomas had joined the Federal Theater Project in New York City to play the role of a farmer's wife in the dramatic production, "Power," and brought the song with her. The play, like many others developed by the Federal Theater Project, was harshly criticized as poor work and New Deal propaganda. Its New York staging, at the Ritz Theater, off-Broadway, though, led to a run of over 130 performances, becoming the most successful work by the organization, and the play traveled to Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland.

"Power" was presented as a "Living Newspaper," (this was also the name of the troupe which produced the play,) with a cast of nearly 100 actors, staged in short blackout scenes adapted from current news reports and court records. It portrayed the struggle to establish the government's right to sell electricity, and the challenge by monopolistic private power companies. Farmers' needs were being ignored, city dwellers were suffering, and, if the Supreme Court allowed it, TVA would "make a vivid reality of the New Deal's plan to provide 'a more abundant life.'"

PP