

**THE DARK SIDE OF KNOXVILLE, 1937 (excerpt)**

by Annemarie Schwarzenbach

(please refer to photographs numbered 36 –44)

The vision of a better life, the American Dream, becomes more and more clouded as the roads lead south. Land, parched by the long summer days, grows rusty in the dry air of poverty which has lasted for seventy years. In the great Tennessee River Valley, the blushing autumn leaves light up the hills, and the red earth gushes from deep crevasses where the air and water are hollowed out of the cavities. The forests that once covered and protected the region have now disappeared, the blackened tree trunks and white pebbles are scattered throughout the meager fields that support a little corn, potato and sugar cane – too little to feed the farmer and his family. The river flows slowly in the direction of the Ohio plains. All along the riverbanks are the traces of destruction caused by the torrential rains: crushed farmhouses, empty window frames, collapsing pillars, uprooted wooden fences and deserted pastures.

With its one hundred thousand inhabitants, Knoxville is one of the urban centers situated in a region not favored by nature: its people have not succeeded in protecting their lands against the destructive force of the river, and therefore have managed to assure themselves of an existence nothing short of miserable. The Tennessee River Valley, with a total population of two and a half million, is becoming one of the most poverty-stricken and most poorly developed regions in America.

The year 1932 saw the birth of the Tennessee Valley Authority, and these three initials, TVA, have become a symbol for the progress of the Nation and the hopes of the Roosevelt era. The TVA was created by Roosevelt to construct dams in order to regulate the flow of the Tennessee River up to the point where it joins with the Ohio River. It has resulted in a vast five-year mission to systematically reconstruct this under-developed and deprived region. All the elements of the TVA activities meet up in Knoxville, where the staff of engineers and experts works incessantly in the headquarters of the TVA.

Across from the old covered market where the farmers bring their mules and carts full of vegetables –and where the American Legion holds its Saturday meetings to hold patriotic discussions and organize their balls—across from a bright cinema where one can see love stories and westerns from the *good old days*, across from the bargains in the windows and the drugstores, across stretches an row of big, even vitrines. In these displays, schematic maps show the zones of the Tennessee River and the centers of interest for the TVA. A series of photographic posters illustrate the power of the river, the history of the river's use a hydraulic force, and the possible benefit that these techniques will serve to all. At night, these vitrines are illuminated from inside, and rival the luminous advertisements on the main street.

But Knoxville, headquarters of the TVA, presents another reversal. The city, so preoccupied with the power of the river, lapses at the riverbanks. The banks of the river are so steep that one would say that the city ended there. Reflecting, luminous signals, advertisements, bright windows, stop abruptly at the banks of the river.

The wide road of a bridge is illuminated by a white light.

The eyes first should become accustomed to the darkness when one stoops under the parapet to look downwards at the river. On the steep slopes are dark houses, without light and without life, like a decoration, without smoke coming out of the chimneys, all doors closed. We must believe that no one lives here: no one could live here. We then discover that the bright streets do not terminate at the bridge and the slopes of the riverbank, but rather that they change: they are no longer paved, becoming gray and dark, and dangerous, and, disappear with humility, leading to the humid gloom of the river.

Westfront is the neighborhood with the poorest inhabitants. The ashen children play under the bridge, climbing on the steel scaffolding, growing in the shadows. The little black children, weak and shaking in their light clothing, remain standing up against the walls of the huts or slip across the thickets along the banks of the river, meanwhile nonchalantly holding their cigarettes between their thin fingers.

During the day, Westfront Street is full of a sort of sad animation. I walk along it and ask the people how they live. The people of Westfront Street, themselves, often do not know. Many of them are on relief, receiving an allotment, many are looking for work, and many are hungry. They do not seem to know that out there, ten minutes from here, there are drivable roads, and fine markets, modern window displays and helpful agencies of the TVA which aim to show how the future will be. In a vast garage, situated in the center of their miserable lodgings, we find six large cars, with black shining lacquer. When the motors are started, and the automobiles drive off, we realize that these are Horses. Unique splendor on Westfront Street. (...)

Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *La face obscure de Knoxville*, National-Zeitung, December 16, 1937.

(Translated from German to French by Dominique Miermont. Translated from French to English by Gabrielle Giattino.)