

**First Roll Call**  
**The Conversation That Launched the Wilderness Society:**  
**Where Did It Take Place?**

William Cronon

Among the best-known stories of the Wilderness Society is the one about how the organization first came into being. In October, 1934, four of the Society's founders—Bob Marshall, Benton MacKaye, Harvey Broome, and Bernard Frank (along with Frank's wife Miriam) were driving in the southern Appalachians for a meeting of the American Forestry Association that they were all attending. Their conversation turned to roads like the one they were on—pushing ever deeper into roadless areas in the high country—and they became increasingly animated as they shared their concerns about the negative impacts such roads might have on mountain landscapes. They finally pulled off to the side of the highway, climbed an embankment, continued talking and eventually decided to found an organization that would defend roadless areas against such intrusions. The following January, 1935, the Wilderness Society was incorporated.

We symbolically reenact that conversation each year when members of the Governing Council gather around a campfire at Roll Call to talk about our shared love for wild places.

Given the importance of Roll Call as one of the Society's oldest rituals (as far as I've been able to determine, Roll Call itself began in the mid-to-late 1950s, at about the time that the campaign for the Wilderness Act began), you would think we would know where this conversation occurred. But we don't. Usually we just say that it was somewhere in the southern Appalachians. Since the founders were greatly concerned about highways like the Skyline Drive being constructed in roadless areas within the boundaries of national parks, the location for this origin story is sometimes assigned to a late-night campfire beside that famous highway. But there's no historical basis for that location, so...where *did* this crucial conversation occur?

By far the most detailed and reliable account we have of the Society's founding is in the first chapter of Paul Sutter's excellent book *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002). Let me begin this historical detective story by quoting Sutter's version at length, along with his crucial footnote 4, which details the sources he used in constructing his narrative.

\*\*\*\*\*

**CHAPTER 1**

**The Problem of the Wilderness**

In October 1934, the American Forestry Association (AFA) held its annual meeting in Knoxville, Tennessee. Among those on the program was a young forester, then working for the

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), named Bob Marshall. Marshall had distinguished himself as a strident critic of the timber industry and federal forestry policy. His 1933 book, *The People's Forests*, made a forceful case for socializing the nation's industrial timberlands. Yet among certain attendees of the AFA conference, Marshall was better known for a 1930 article, "The Problem of the Wilderness," in which he called for the "organization of spirited people who will fight for the freedom of the wilderness."<sup>1</sup>

Benton MacKaye, a forester and regional planner who was living in Knoxville and working for the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) at the time of the AFA meeting, had read and been moved by Marshall's plea. Indeed, MacKaye was confronting his own problem of the wilderness. In 1921, he had proposed a visionary plan for "an Appalachian Trail." Although his trail was nearing completion by 1934, it was threatened by a series of federally funded skyline drives being planned for and built along the Appalachian ridgeline.<sup>2</sup> MacKaye and a number of his supporters were busy organizing a protest against these incursions, and they were eager to talk with Marshall about their efforts.

They had their opportunity when, on October 19, Marshall joined MacKaye, Harvey Broome, and Bernard and Miriam Frank for an all-day field trip to a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp outside of Knoxville. The AFA had arranged the trip to give conference-goers a sense of the profound changes occurring in the upper Tennessee Valley. Broome knew the region well. He was a Knoxville lawyer and a leading member of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, one of the groups most important to the construction of the Appalachian Trail (AT) in the South. Bernard Frank, newer to the region, was a watershed management expert on the TVA's forestry staff and, as Broome would later recall, "a genius at reading the landscape."<sup>3</sup> As the group drove north toward Norris Dam in the Franks' car, they discussed forming the sort of organization that Marshall had proposed in 1930. In fact, they had broached the idea during a brief visit Marshall had made to Knoxville two months earlier, and in the interim someone—probably MacKaye—had drafted a constitution that became the focus of discussion during the drive. As the conversation became more animated, the group decided to pull over and get out of the car. They clambered up an embankment by the side of the road—"between Knoxville and Lafollette somewhere near Coal Creek," Broome would later remember—and there they agreed upon the principles of what was to become the Wilderness Society, the first national organization dedicated solely to the preservation of wilderness. It was in just such a setting that the founders felt most keenly what Marshall had called "the problem of the wilderness."<sup>4</sup>

The Wilderness Society's roadside creation was rich with symbols of the founders' motivating concerns. Foremost among those concerns were the road and the car. The group had come together to define a new preservationist ideal because of a common feeling that the automobile and road building threatened what was left of wild America. Wilderness, as they defined it, would keep large portions of the landscape free of these forces. And yet, despite their flight from the Franks' car, a gesture evocative of their agenda, they could not escape the fact that, literally as well as figuratively, the automobile and improved roads had brought them together that day. The very conditions that had prompted their collective concern for protecting wilderness had also enabled their concern. That paradox gave wilderness its modern meaning.

4. For details of this founding moment, see Broome, "Origins of the Wilderness Society," *The Living Wilderness* 5, 5 (July 1940): 13–15; Michael Nadel, "Genesis of the Wilderness Society," June 1973, TWSP, Box 11, Folder 19; Stephen Fox, "'We Want No Straddlers,'" *Wilderness* 48 (Winter 1984): 5–19; Harvey Broome to Robert Sterling Yard, September 7, 1939, TWSP, Box 11, Folder 20. The Broome quote is from this letter. There is disagreement about who drafted the constitution at the center of this roadside discussion. Broome says it was MacKaye while Fox suggests it was Marshall. Neither documents their claim. A letter between Marshall and Anderson (October 24, 1934, TWSP, Box 11, Folder 15) suggests that it was MacKaye, perhaps with Broome's assistance. But MacKaye, in a letter to Yard (September 16, 1939, TWSP, Box 11, Folder 20), gives Marshall more of the credit.

\*\*\*\*\*

The historical mystery I want to try to solve here is simple: how much can we figure out about the place where this story occurred?

Sutter makes clear that the conversation did not happen at night and did not involve a campfire; those elements were added later when the Roll Call ritual was added to Governing Council meetings in the late 1950s. Neither did it occur next to the Skyline Drive or in a national park. Instead, it happened next to a highway in the vicinity of Norris Dam, one of the most celebrated of all the projects undertaken by the Tennessee Valley Administration. The dam was named for Nebraska Senator George Norris (a Republican), who was one of the nation's leading advocates for public hydropower and of the integrated watershed management that TVA was intended to showcase for the entire nation. TVA built dams for flood control, navigation improvement, and electricity generation (electricity that would soon provide the energy for uranium enrichment at Oak Ridge as part of the Manhattan Project in World War II), but it also promoted erosion control, rural electrification, agricultural improvement, and, not least, motorized recreation on a system of highways so Americans could access new outdoor opportunities like the lake that would be impounded by the Norris Dam.

In addition to constructing the dam and cutting down forests in the valleys it would flood, TVA engineers also designed a limited-access freeway to transport construction materials to the site, and, once the dam was completed, to provide easy driving from Knoxville, Tennessee, to the tourist attractions it intended to develop at Norris Lake.

You can read about the Norris Dam in Wikipedia at

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norris\\_Dam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norris_Dam)

and here's a description of the Norris Freeway by Martha Carver of the Tennessee Department of Transportation:

<http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1004>

Given the importance of the Norris Freeway to this story, it's worth quoting Carver's description of the road at some length:

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) built the Norris Freeway in 1934 as a component of its first hydroelectric project, Norris Dam. The Norris Project inaugurated President Roosevelt's most ambitious New Deal program. In addition to the dam, the generously funded agency included plans for a state park and a planned community. As construction began, the TVA soon found it necessary to build either a highway or a railroad to transport materials from the railroad in Coal Creek (later renamed Lake City) to the project site and to provide better access between its administrative offices in Knoxville and Norris. The TVA chose to build a roadway to meet both needs and, after considering a variety of roadway options, selected a freeway design.

A freeway is a highway with limited vehicular access from side roads and from abutting properties. It provides a high level roadway with easy grades and smooth curves to facilitate high-speed traffic. An outgrowth of the City Beautiful Movement of the Progressive era, a few parkways or freeways had been built in other areas, but the Norris Freeway was the first limited access highway in Tennessee and "the world's first utilitarian, limited-access road." (1) The Norris Freeway, which cost \$1.5 million to build, extended 21 miles between Coal Creek in Anderson County and Halls Crossroads north of Knoxville. The freeway contained two ten-foot traffic lanes with two- to four-foot shoulders within a 250-foot right-of-way. TVA limited billboards and commercial uses along the freeway for aesthetic reasons and required 75-foot construction setbacks....

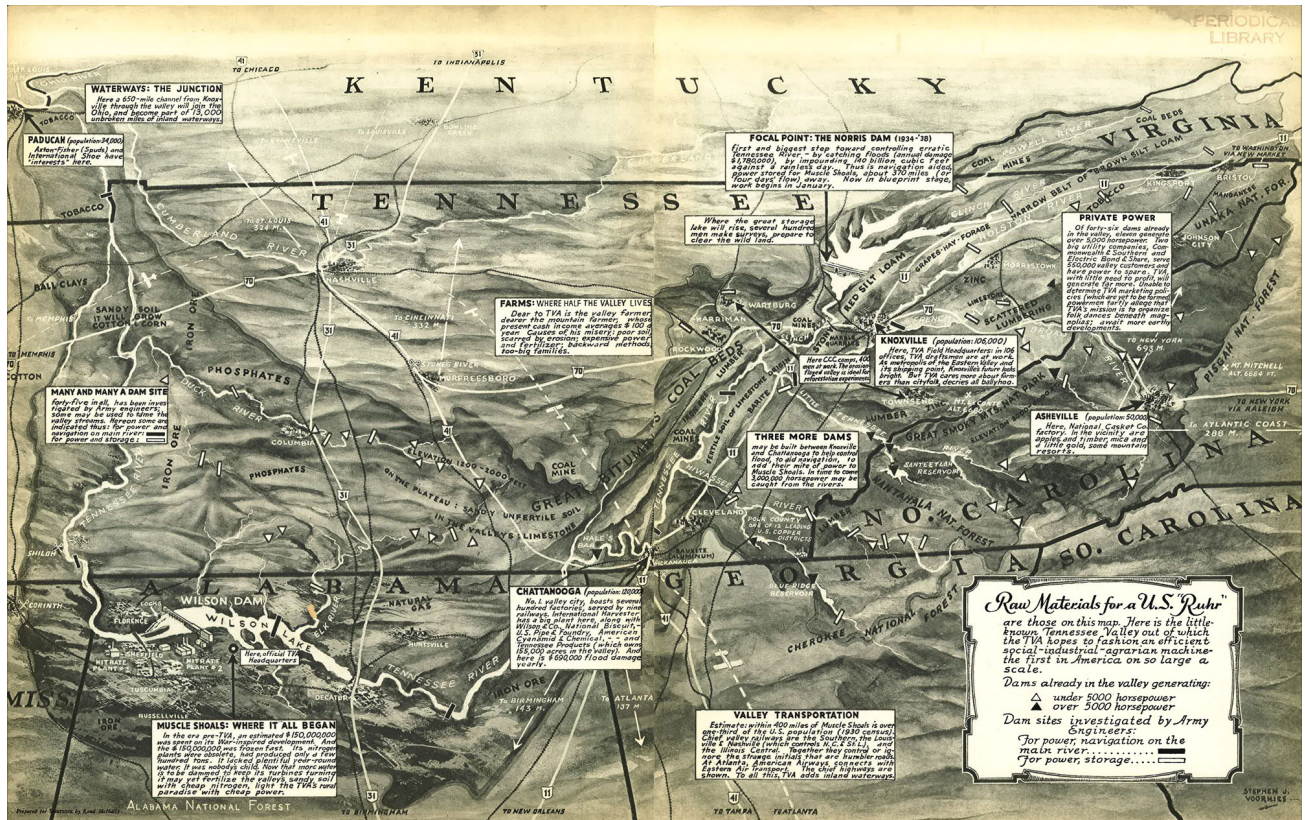
Much of the Norris Freeway is relatively intact, but development pressures increasingly threaten it. The State Historic Preservation Office has determined that 18.9 miles of the original 21-mile Norris Freeway is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

If you have 36 minutes to spare, you might enjoy watching this 1936 promotional video that the TVA produced to celebrate what it was doing for citizens in the valley. Norris Dam figures prominently in the footage.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TriPHr4GzVs>

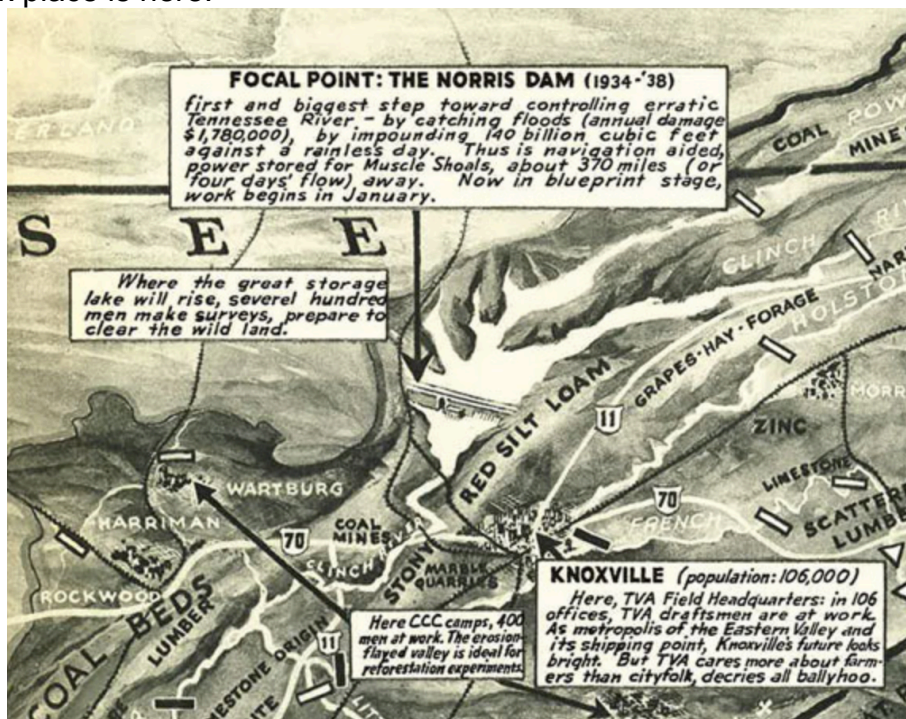
But you can also get a sense of the vision and ambition of the overall TVA project from the following graphic, where Norris Dam appears near the Tennessee-Kentucky border in the upper-right-hand corner of a map depicting "Raw Materials for a U.S. Ruhr":





<http://features.blogs.fortune.cnn.com/2013/04/14/tennessee-valley-authority-fortune-1933/>

The section of the above landscape where the conversation that created the Wilderness Society took place is here:

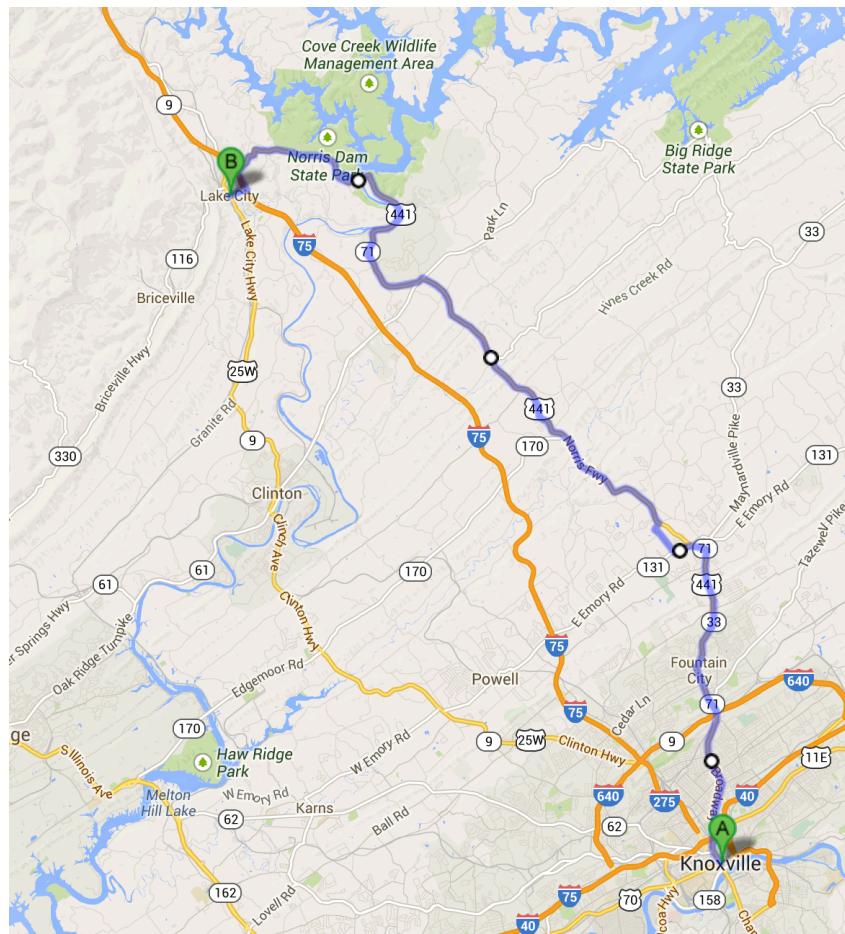




TVA was bringing progress to the Tennessee Valley...and the price that might be paid for such progress was what concerned the Society's founders. Benton MacKaye and Bernard Frank were employed by the TVA, so were not at all hostile to the benefits it would bring. But they feared that other, less tangible wild values might be needlessly sacrificed to those benefits if left undefended.

The Norris Dam construction site, along with the several Civilian Conservation Corps camps where many of the men working on the project were housed, were the field trip destinations that brought the Wilderness Society's to their roadside conservation on October 19, 1934. So we know that their fateful meeting took place somewhere near Norris Dam. The most accurate information we have about their route is Broome's later memory, quoted by Sutter from a 1939 letter to Robert Sterling Yard, that they pulled to the side of the road ***"between Knoxville and Lafollette somewhere near Coal Creek."***

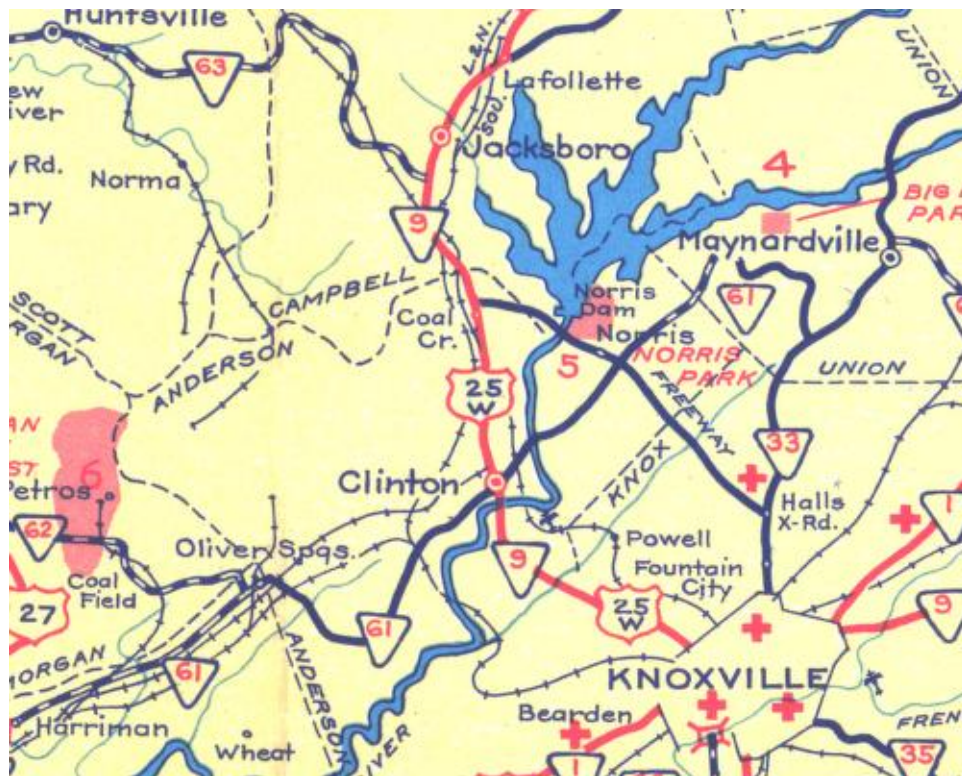
This narrows things down considerably. Here's a modern Google Maps link to the area through which they were driving that day: <http://goo.gl/maps/cBbVy> (Lafollette lies farther to the northwest, but I suspect that they may not actually have traveled so far if viewing TVA developments was the goal of their field trip.)



You'll notice that I've had Google Maps mark a route along 441, also known as the Norris Freeway, the road under construction in 1934 that would provide access to the dam when it was completed a few months later. Their other possible route would have been the road numbered 9/25W (Interstate 75 would not be built for another quarter century), but I'm guessing that this was NOT the route that prompted their conversation, since the whole point of their field trip that day was to view construction projects associated with Norris Dam. If I'm right about this, it was almost certainly this new highway in the Tennessee mountains that was on full display as they made the drive, and that finally prompted them to pull off to the side of the road to finish their conversation.

To get a better sense of what the road system would have looked like in 1934, I tried to locate a highway map from that period, and the best I could do was an online copy of the 1938 Tennessee State Highway map, accessible from this link:

[http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/us\\_states/tennessee/index2\\_After1935.htm](http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/us_states/tennessee/index2_After1935.htm)



As I've explained above, it seems very likely that the segment labeled "FREEWAY" southeast of Norris Dam was the route they drove, though we'll never know for sure. This map also solves the key mystery that has puzzled Wilderness Society members trying to understand Broome's reference to "Coal Creek" as the site of the fateful conversation. The modern Google map I provided above makes no mention of any place called Coal Creek, but on this 1938 map, you'll find it just west of Norris Dam as "Coal Cr."

Wikipedia supplies everything needed to explain why the two maps differ. Although Google Maps doesn't label it, there still is a small stream called Coal Creek that Wikipedia describes here:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coal\\_Creek\\_\(Clinch\\_River\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coal_Creek_(Clinch_River))

It's a 10-mile-long tributary of the Clinch River that flows into the Clinch near the modern town of Lake City, Tennessee. But this is almost certainly *not* the "Coal Creek" that Harvey Broome had in mind in the letter Sutter quotes above. Instead, Broome probably meant the *town* of Coal Creek, which changed its name to Lake City two years later, in 1936, to rebrand itself as the gateway to the new lake being impounded by Norris Dam. See the Wikipedia entry on the town for more details:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake\\_City,\\_Tennessee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_City,_Tennessee)

So: the conversation that launched the Wilderness Society probably happened somewhere along the Norris Freeway between Norris Dam and the modern town of Lake City. Although we'll probably never be able to pinpoint the location more accurately than this, it does mean we know the landscape that was before their eyes as spoke, and we know as well that the brand-new road where they were standing was among the things most on their minds as they expressed their enthusiasm for Bob Marshall's earlier call for an "organization of spirited people who will fight for the freedom of the wilderness."

And because we know the landscape through which they drove that day, it's actually possible to find photographs depicting something close to what they saw. I found online a series of photographs in the "Tennessee Electronic Library" that were taken in 1935 to document CCC work on the Norris Dam and freeway. The index page for the image collection starts at

<http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/b/bib/bib-idx?submit=Sort&sort=By+Date+Ascending&type=boolean&c=vvs-bib&sid=703b551adc6d214aba089d681507327d&q1=civilian+conservation+corps&rgn1=entire+record&op2=And&rgn2=entire+record&op3=And&rgn3=entire+record&date1=1700&date2=2007&cc=vvs-bib&view=reslist&fmt=short&page=reslist&size=25>

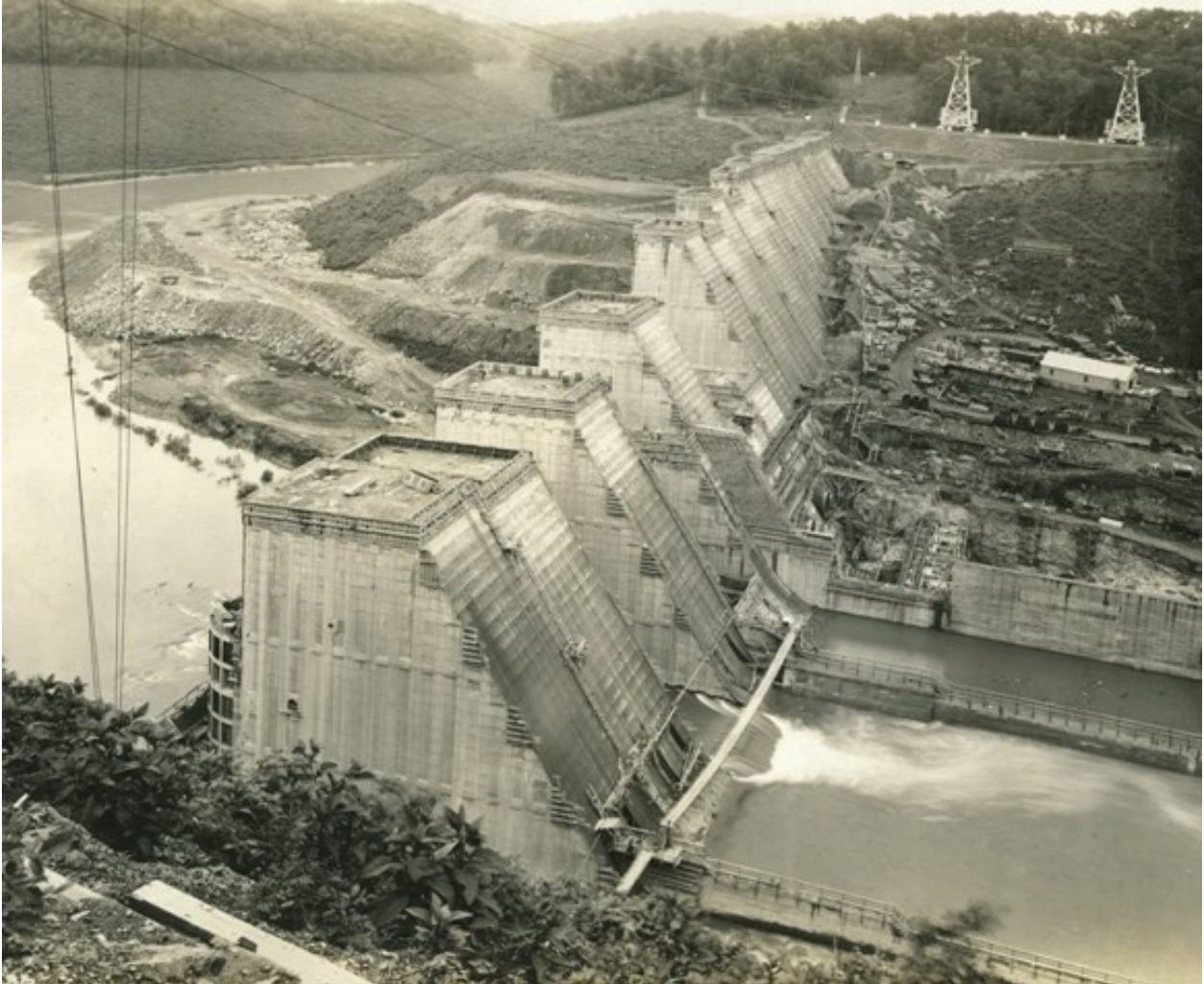
Because this is 1935, the year after the road was completed in 1934, most of the photos show the CCC "boys" adding finishing touches to the highway, but its newness is still obvious in the images, and that is surely the quality that was most striking to the Wilderness Society's founders as they drove the just-completed route. The impact on the mountains and forests was still obvious everywhere they looked. I've pasted the most relevant images below with their associated captions and URLs, along with a few additional photos from other websites as appropriate. They speak for themselves.





C. Frykholm, Photographer; Clinch River before land was cleared for Norris Dam (Volunteer Voices: The Growth of Democracy in Tennessee (single images))

[http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015\\_000060\\_000209\\_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories](http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015_000060_000209_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories)



Norris Dam Under Construction (TVA)

[http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org/places/norris\\_dam](http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org/places/norris_dam)

This image is especially instructive because it shows how much of the forest was cleared from hillsides above the dam as part of the construction process.



Otto F. Haslbauer, Photographer; Work on Norris Freeway (Volunteer Voices: The Growth of Democracy in Tennessee (single images))

[http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015\\_000062\\_000215\\_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories](http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015_000062_000215_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories)





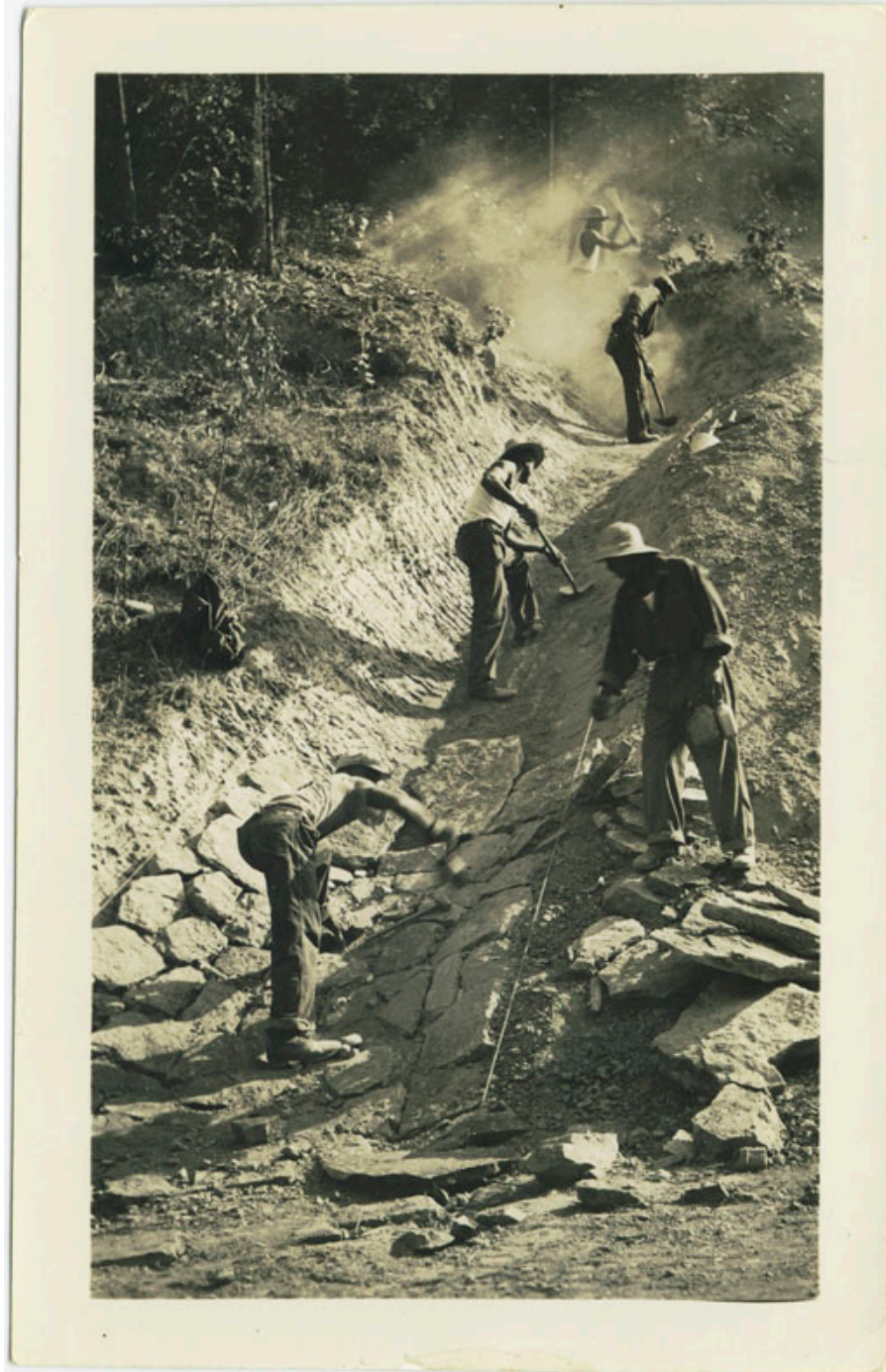
Otto F. Haslbauer, Photographer; Bridge over a creek, Norris Freeway, built by C.C.C. workers (Volunteer Voices: The Growth of Democracy in Tennessee (single images))  
[http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015\\_000062\\_000220\\_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories](http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015_000062_000220_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories)



Otto F. Haslbauer, Photographer; C.C.C. workers grading and dressing a stream along the freeway (Volunteer Voices: The Growth of Democracy in Tennessee (single images))

[http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015\\_000062\\_000218\\_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps%20&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories](http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015_000062_000218_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps%20&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories)





Otto F. Haslbauer, Photographer; C.C.C. workers building rock gutter along freeway (Volunteer Voices: The Growth of Democracy in Tennessee (single images))  
[http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015\\_000062\\_000217\\_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories](http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015_000062_000217_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories)





Otto F. Haslbauer, Photographer; Tamping and finishing posts for guard rail along freeway, 1935 (Volunteer Voices: The Growth of Democracy in Tennessee (single images))

[http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015\\_000062\\_000223\\_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rqn=All+Categories](http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015_000062_000223_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rqn=All+Categories)



Otto F. Haslbauer, Photographer; Planting seedlings on a slope, Abe Kennerly in foreground (Volunteer Voices: The Growth of Democracy in Tennessee (single images)) **Civilian Conservation Corps** members work planting seedlings on a slope, probably along the Norris Freeway. Abe Kennerly is in the foreground.

[http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015\\_000062\\_000214\\_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories](http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz;view=entry;subview=detail;cc=vvz;entryid=x-0015_000062_000214_0000;&q1=civilian%20conservation%20corps&op2=And&q2=&op3=And&q3=&rgn=All+Categories)

Perhaps it was just such a hillside as the one above where the founders of the Wilderness Society held their conversation.

Incidentally, a list of all the CCC camps associated with Norris Dam and Coal Creek can be found here: [http://www.ccclegacy.org/CCC\\_Camps\\_Tennessee.html](http://www.ccclegacy.org/CCC_Camps_Tennessee.html)

Three years later, after the dam and the freeway were completely finished, images like the ones below were widely circulated by the Tennessee Valley Administration to show the landscape transformations it had brought about, integrating hydropower, forestry, erosion control, motorized recreation, and overall regional development in a vision of progress that became one of the chief icons of the New Deal and its promise of hope and progress amid the Great Depression.





Norris Dam Postcard, 1938

<http://www.ebay.com/itm/RPPC-NORRIS-DAM-TENNESSEE-PART-OF-TVA-1938-VINTAGE-REAL-PHOTO-POSTCARD-/161228048646?autorefresh=true>



TVA Freeway Near Norris Dam

[http://www.ebay.com/itm/Tennessee-Valley-Authoritys-Freeway-Near-Norris-Dam-TN-Antique-Linen-Postcard/200865473621?\\_trksid=p2047675.c100011.m1850&\\_trkparms=aid%3D222006%26algo%3DSIC.FITP%26ao%3D1%26asc%3D20468%26meid%3D5331639515107262537%26pid%3D100011%26prg%3D9138%26rk%3D0%26rkt%3D10%26sd%3D200821134818&autorefresh=true](http://www.ebay.com/itm/Tennessee-Valley-Authoritys-Freeway-Near-Norris-Dam-TN-Antique-Linen-Postcard/200865473621?_trksid=p2047675.c100011.m1850&_trkparms=aid%3D222006%26algo%3DSIC.FITP%26ao%3D1%26asc%3D20468%26meid%3D5331639515107262537%26pid%3D100011%26prg%3D9138%26rk%3D0%26rkt%3D10%26sd%3D200821134818&autorefresh=true)





TVA Freeway Near Norris Dam

\*\*\*\*\*

All of this is what was on the minds of Bob Marshall, Benton MacKaye, Harvey Broome, and Bernard and Miriam Frank as they stood on an embankment of this highway and worried about wild mountain landscapes being sacrificed to progress. It was roads like these that they sought to prevent from invading too far into the high country they loved.