

The Bitter Southerner Podcast:

Progress, Heartbreak & Art: The TVA

Chuck Reece (00:05):

Howdy. It's the Bitter Southerner podcast, episode seven of our second season from Georgia Public Broadcasting and the magazine I edit, The Bitter Southerner. I'm your host Chuck Reece, and today we're going to travel, and maybe even do a little time travel through the Tennessee Valley.

(00:33):

(Pete Seeger singing).

Chuck Reece (00:35):

The late great Pete Seeger was his song TVA song.

(01:02):

(Pete Seeger singing).

Chuck Reece (01:03):

Now what he was singing about, The Tennessee Valley Authority, the TVA as we all call it, was created as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt new deal to lift the country out of the great depression. Large dams were built to bring electricity to the rural South to control flooding, to prevent disease and improve agricultural conditions. And here's President Roosevelt talking all that up in 1940 in Tennessee at the dedication of the Chickamauga Dam.

President Roosevelt (01:31):

This Chickamauga Dam, the sixth in the series of mammoth structure built by the TVA for the people of the United States is helping to give to all of us human control of a watershed of the Tennessee river, in order that it may serve in full the purposes of mankind.

Chuck Reece (01:56):

Now these mammoth structures as the president said, did electrify the rural South, but many were unhappy because that progress uprooted their communities.

President Roosevelt (02:08):

There are those who maintain that the development of the enterprise that lies largely in this state, the development of it they say is not a proper activity of government. As far me, I glory in it as one of the great social and economic achievements of the United States.

Chuck Reece (02:35):

As The Tennessee Valley Authority built down for like the Chickamauga, many communities were flooded. According to TVA data analyzed by Bitter Southerner contributor Micah Cash, some 14,000 families were displaced by dams built by the TVA. The TVA offered to buy their property so they could relocate. Many agreed, but others like Mattie Randolph put up a fight.

Chuck Reece (03:04):

Mattie lived in a small two room log cabin with her husband and seven children, and their property was going to be flooded with the creation of Tennessee's Norris Dam. And according to TVA records, Ms. Randolph threatened several TVA workers with a shotgun, and in one instance said this-

Mattie Randolph (Voice Actor) (03:24):

Well I'll stay here until the water comes up, and flow down with it when it does.

Chuck Reece (03:30):

Mattie Randolph obviously did not mince words. She wanted to keep her 14 acres.

Mattie Randolph (Voice Actor) (03:36):

They want to beat me out of it, they might as well take it off. I ain't going to take a sin of it.

Chuck Reece (03:48):

In its report, the TVA described Mattie Randolph like this. "She is a very domineering, tyrannous, blustering soul. Her stubborn obstinate manner has possibly put up a strong wall to any possible successful contacts. Another problem is the fact that neither she nor her family have any idea as to the meaning of the TVA, why it came in and broke up her community, why they moved her neighbors away, why they closed the gates of the quote 'darn dam' and back to water up over her garden just at the time she wanted to pick her beans. But they didn't fool her as she said with her hands on her hips, where she just took her shoes off, weighted down in the water and picked the beans anyway. In her mind, the TVA had ruined a good farming country."

Chuck Reece (04:39):

In the end, faced with the prospect of rising waters overcoming her family, Mattie Randolph finally agreed to move. And her story later inspired the great film director Eley Cazan to make his 1960 movie Wild River.

Jo Van Fleet (as Ella Garth): (04:55):

I don't say it on my land that I poured my hearts bloodened.

Chuck Reece (05:00):

In this scene from the film, an elderly woman named Ellen Gar vows to protect her land as the TVA administrator urges her to leave.

TVA Worker: (05:10):

Sometimes it happens that we can't remain true to our beliefs without dreading maybe a great many people, and I'm afraid this is one of those times. You're the only person who hasn't sold in this Valley.

Jo Van Fleet (as Ella Garth) (05:26):

That's all right with me.

Chuck Reece (05:29):

That was the late Oscar winning actress, Jo Van Fleet as Ella Garth in Wild River.

Chuck Reece (05:39):

You know the classic story of people versus progress when set in the South is the early 20th century, is typically associated with the TVA. But it is important to note for historical accuracy that the federal government actually broke ground on North Alabama's Wilson Dam in 1918, six years before the TVA form, and in 1933 TVA took ownership of it. But regardless of who owned what, how rural Southerners reacted to the dams depended on one thing, whether they were displaced loggers or newly employed dam builders.

Chuck Reece (06:21):

Now these stories have fueled works of art from Pete Seeger all the way down to the modern day. Like this song by Jason Isbell.

JASON ISBELL (singing) (06:44):

Chuck Reece (06:51):

Today on the Bitter Southerner podcast, progress, heartbreak and art, The TVA.

Chuck Reece (07:14):

Now we just heard a little bit of Jason Isbell song about the TVA, and you probably know the name of Jason Isbell. He's the widely acclaimed singer, songwriter from North Alabama, and he wrote that song during his tenure in the band that plays our theme song, Drive-By Truckers. Back then when I first heard Jason's TVA, I was struck by the stark difference there was in point of view between that song and a song written a few years earlier by one of his band mates, Mike Cooley. Mike's song was called Uncle Frank, and I want you to hear just a little bit of the original from DBT's 1999 album, Pizza Deliverance.

Mike Cooley (08:04):

(Singing).

Chuck Reece (08:34):

Cooley's song for Frank character was one of those displaced loggers. He didn't have much to thank God for after Wilson dam flooded his community right there near the mussel shells where Cooley grew up. So I asked Mike to join us for this show to talk about that contrast and to play Uncle Frank for us. Now, Mike wrote that song more than 20 years ago and when he wrote it, the source he says was a story his grandfather told him about a man who lost his home and livelihood thanks to the Wilson dam.

Chuck Reece (09:05):

Now, it was precisely the kind of story that would make any young songwriters say, "Now I got to write that." But now Cooley's older of course, and he knows more and he never really carried a grudge against

what the TVA accomplished. In fact, he says, playing the song these days has him seeing parallels between the days of those floods and the juncture our country is at right now.

Mike Cooley (09:31):

I never had a negative impression of anything the TVA had accomplished, really. But quite the contrary.

Chuck Reece (09:38):

And is that still true for you?

Mike Cooley (09:40):

Yeah. Well there's certain inevitabilities. I think we're at a very similar point now. It's like, the country at the time, it wasn't just about coming out of the depression and the economy would have recovered, yeah, that's going to happen. But it was about is the country, or is the United States going to come out of this on the forefront of the 20th century, or is the rest of the world gonna leave us behind? And I think in hindsight, you look back and it's like, you couldn't do one without the other.

Chuck Reece (10:18):

And here we are at a similar junction again.

Mike Cooley (10:21):

I think we're in a very similar place, yeah.

Chuck Reece (10:24):

I think it's probably time to let everybody to listen to you play the song.

Mike Cooley (10:27):

Okay.

Chuck Reece (10:28):

And I'm going to say what my daddy used to say before he would lead songs in church, "Listen to the words real close now."

Mike Cooley (10:39):

(singing).

Chuck Reece (14:25):

Damn son that was good.

Mike Cooley (14:26):

Well thank you.

Chuck Reece (14:28):

That whole song doesn't feel like an old story necessarily. I particularly think about what's always been my favorite line in it, 'the banks around the holler so for lakefront property were doctors, lawyers and musicians teach their kids to water ski.'

Mike Cooley (14:45):

Yeah. Throwing musicians into these elite occupations, a uniquely Muscle Shoals area thing and a little nod to ... I think it may have benefited the lucky and the elite probably a little more than anybody else. But what doesn't?

Chuck Reece (15:03):

As you can testify to, we're not that many generations away from stories about people who lost their homes and communities and had their lives changed forever, because of the TVA. But at the same time, it was a wonderful thing that the rural South got electricity, because that changed things for the positive for everybody.

Mike Cooley (15:35):

Yeah, people do get left behind. You use the phrase, or you hear it often, we have to drag these people kicking and screaming into the modern times, but some people don't make the trip.

Chuck Reece (15:46):

That's true.

Mike Cooley (15:49):

But this area, in many ways, I guess at that time, rural was a lot more rural than it is today, but in some ways it may be more rural today than it was then. I don't know. It's hard for me to tell. That's where the divide is. But this was in the height of the great depression. People in those kinds of areas didn't really notice they were poor, underdeveloped before. It's like, reconstruction, what do you mean? Nothing around here was ever constructed much in the first place. And change is not something human beings are wired for, especially fundamental and maybe monumental changes to your entire way of life.

Chuck Reece (16:45):

Human beings aren't wired for change, huh? Well, I appreciate songwriters like Mike Cooley whose work helps a lot of listeners like me do a little rewiring.

Chuck Reece (17:07):

Now, as we mentioned, Mike Uncle Frank was inspired by stories grandfather told him about communities affected by the Wilson down, and that dam holds back the Tennessee river along the line between Lauderdale and Colbert counties in Alabama.

Chuck Reece (17:23):

A man named Joshua Nicholas Wynn was interviewed for an oral history project about the TVA, which is housed at the national archives in Atlanta. And in his interview, he shared his memories from when the Wilson dam was being built and he was a teenager at the time, living in Muscle Shoals.

Joshua Nicholas Winn (17:43):

We knew, all from 1918 that the dam was being built, Wilson dam. One of the slogans before the dam was built was dam, the Tennessee. That's dam without the N. But we didn't want the Tennessee thing because that would ruin our playground, where we lived. We as children, saw there was progress with a little P, because it was wrecking our whole life. See, when I left for college in '24, the water was coming up, and water left my eyes.

Chuck Reece (18:23):

For a couple of summers, Joshua worked for the TVA as a clerk in one of the warehouses, and he had vivid memories of seeing the water levels rise up.

Joshua Nicholas Winn (18:32):

I don't know, all of the trees that was SOS. It looked like SOS, it was 505.

Speaker (18:39):

Which stood for?

Joshua Nicholas Winn (18:39):

Which was the water level, where the new waterline would be, and that was way up on the reservation. And I told my dad it looked like SOS to me, which is save oh save, but it didn't work.

Chuck Reece (18:57):

But as he got older, Joshua started seeing things differently. Only four years after the dam was complete, he was working as a school principal in Lauderdale County, Alabama, not far from where he grew up.

Joshua Nicholas Winn (19:09):

I had the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, three in one room. I had 12 classes a day, half an hour a piece. Well, guess what we used for illumination? Coal or our lamps.

Chuck Reece (19:23):

The life in that area changed once the Wilson dam brought electricity.

Joshua Nicholas Winn (19:28):

Now you can see the countryside is illuminated. We have the water system plus electricity, and it has bloomed and blossomed. Thank goodness with TVA.

Chuck Reece (19:49):

Those comments from Joshua Nicholas Wynn were available thanks to the Tennessee Valley Authority's oral history program. Mr Wynn himself died in 1997 at the age of 92.

Chuck Reece (20:12):

Just ahead, we've got more art inspired by the TVA and the stories of the communities that were lost when it came through. This is the Bitter Southerner podcast from Georgia public broadcast.

Chuck Reece (20:38):

It's the Bitter Southerner podcast. Welcome back on this episode. We're talking about the eternal tug of war between progress and preservation. The story that is writ large on the culture of the South because of how hydroelectricity changed the rural environment forever.

Chuck Reece (21:00):

Right now in North Georgia at the Nottely Dam, built and completed during world war II, and you're hearing the Nottley river brushing up against the dam's rocky edge.

Chuck Reece (21:20):

Lisa Russell was a college English instructor and she's written several books about lost towns in Georgia, including one called Underwater Ghost Towns of North Georgia.

Lisa Russell (21:31):

That noise is freaky, like a lonely shore. You think it would be the ocean, but it's not. It's all manmade. It's those graves. Those 84 graves that were left down there.

Chuck Reece (21:43):

As communities were about to be flooded by new dams, the TVA gave residents a chance to have the local grave sites moved. Beginning in 1933, nearly 70,000 graves across the region were investigated, and more than 20,000 graves were relocated. But Lisa says that she was surprised to find out how many graves were left untouched in the areas affected by the Nottely Dam.

Lisa Russell (22:11):

Nottley is a very interesting one, all the different people that lived here, and what gets me too is the graves. Why did they not get all the grace? There's a little cemetery called Butt, two people in there. The relatives who they could get a hold of said, "Ah, just leave them in place." There's like eight cemeteries that they had to investigate right here. There was only two out of 86 graves. They could only find two families that wanted them moved. At 86. So what does that say? There's a lot of graves under that water.

Chuck Reece (22:43):

And it's not just the grave sites. Nottely Dam and other dams across the Tennessee Valley, homes and businesses were lost. All the markers of the communities now gone, are largely forgotten. Their life submerged. And Lisa says there's even arrowheads left behind by earlier inhabitants, The Cherokee nation.

Lisa Russell (23:06):

There's a lot of stuff lost. A lot of culture, a lot of history, a lot of archeology lost. There's something about the past that gives a security for the future. The people that lived here everyday they get up and they try to make a living. And then when that living was gone, they figured out a way to make a new living. It's the power of the human spirit, I guess. And that's why it's important.

Chuck Reece (23:28):

Well, she's absolutely right. Now thanks to Lisa Russell for giving us a tour of Georgia Nottely Dam. When we visited her, we saw skewers and boaters all over the surface of the Lake, a normal day on the lake nothing unusual. But on that particular day we thought about all this forgotten beneath the murky greenish water, seeing those skiers and fishermen fell absolutely surreal.

Chuck Reece (23:54):

You know the lamb that was sacrificed to create those lakes and to give the rural South electric power, all that weighed heavily on Bitter Southerner contributor Caleb Johnson when he was growing up in North Alabama, staring into bodies of water and wondering what was below.

Caleb Johnson (24:11):

I heard the myths and legends of catfish as big as a Volkswagen Beetles and sunk in towns and churches, with the steeple still stand and graves that weren't relocated. And you know, as a kid, it just fascinated me. I wanted nothing more than the lakes to dry up or the dams to be gone, so all the water was gone and I could walk around in that mud and ruin and see all these things that I'd grown up hearing were down there.

Chuck Reece (24:39):

And that curiosity inspired Caleb's debut novel Treeborne, which came out two years ago and tells a story of a fictional Alabama town that's soon to be flooded. The novel's main character, Janie Treeborne refuses to leave. Caleb writes about that struggle and the history surrounding the property. Here's Caleb reading just a little bit of the opening.

Caleb Johnson (25:01):

The water was coming, but Janie Treeborne would not leave. She lived alone in this house, perched on the edge of a roadside peach orchard in Alberta, Alabama ever since Lee Malone sold it to her. Sold maybe not the right word for the price she paid. The price he'd take. But it was hers and she would not leave, rather the water take her too.

Caleb Johnson (25:22):

She'd been telling her visitor exactly how she came to own the house, which once was Lee's office, and before that, his boyhood home a complicated matter. To tell how this house and the surrounding property became hers, she needed to tell how it became Lee's. And to do that, she needed to first tell about a man named Mr. Prince.

Chuck Reece (25:42):

That's beautiful. And-

Caleb Johnson (25:44):

Thank you.

Chuck Reece (25:45):

One of the things that we want to do here is explore not just a history of this thing, but how it has come to be a source of various works of art over the years. I think it comes from something I've always

noticed. There is generally genuinely interesting sort of love/hate dialogue about the TVA when you talk to Southerners whose families were affected by the Authority's work.

Chuck Reece (26:18):

On the one hand, there's the knowledge that the TVA brought electricity across the rural South, and thus helped usher it into the modern world. And then on the other hand is the fact that so many families lost their land and the homes they'd had for generations. Whole communities would disappear in a single day.

Caleb Johnson (26:42):

Yeah. You know, Chuck, and if you read the history, there's this idea that giving up the land, and that's how it's framed oftentimes in the history is giving up the land, was this sacrifice for a greater good. The TVA, began and relocation of families was happening from around The Depression leading up to World War II, so a time when patriotism was rampant in parts of the country. And so there was this idea of sacrificing and it being a noble thing for some families and some communities to say, "Hey, we'll move, we'll leave this land here and go somewhere else and start over."

Caleb Johnson (27:21):

And that's an idea that I think is a little bit of a myth that I never bought into. By the time I was growing up in the 80s, long after the TVA began, I grew up in a time when there was a really big real estate boom on some of these bodies of water. So I grew up seeing okay, these families moved, this land was sacrificed to create these bodies of water to create this dam and bring this modernity to the South but who has access to this water now? Who owns this land now? And when I looked around and when I tried to find places to go swim or walk or be out in nature, I realized it wasn't families like mine. It wasn't working class families. And I assumed it wasn't at the time, families who, who were largely asked to sacrifice that land in the first place.

Chuck Reece (28:15):

Tell me again the name of the little town that you grew up in.

Caleb Johnson (28:19):

I grew up in Arley, Alabama. It's in Winston County.

Chuck Reece (28:23):

And how far from the Wilson Dam is that?

Caleb Johnson (28:27):

You get in the car and go north about probably an hour, 45 minutes, you'd be Muscle Shoals.

Chuck Reece (28:35):

Okay. All right.

Caleb Johnson (28:35):

I have a memory, you know, or a lot of memories actually of being a kid. When we'd go on vacation if my parents had the time and the money, we would go to Gulf Shores. And that was a big vacation. But if

they didn't have as much time or money in a given year, I remember we'd go up to the shores on vacation for two, three nights. And we'd stay in this Ramada Inn right there where the highways come together just before you cross the river. And behind the Ramada Inn in the woods were walking trails and the trails were sort of built through and around a former CCC encampment, and you could walk out onto the riverbank and along the Tennessee River, depending on the water level and you walk up far enough and looming in the distance, sure enough there was the Wilson Dam.

Caleb Johnson (29:21):

And so I grew up going to this place and those are really vivid and happy memories for me. Exploring the woods with my parents, find an occasional Arrowhead washed out of the river bank there. And then in the distance seeing what to me was just a monumental machine or a piece of construction in the distance. And it really loomed large in my imagination all those years since.

Chuck Reece (29:46):

I think the first truly monumental structure I ever laid eyes on was Blue Ridge Dam, which was a Georgia power lake, not a TVA lake. But, I had the same reaction to it that you did.

Caleb Johnson (30:01):

Yeah. Where I'm from isn't even a town Chuck, it's a rural community. There's no stoplight, there's no fast food to this day. It's a school, a one-storey school, couple of gas stations, couple of restaurants and a three way stop, and that's it. So I certainly wasn't seeing even two story buildings, red brick buildings, like you might see in a smaller town, a slightly more urban version of the South. And I surely, surely wasn't seeing a skyscraper of any kind unless I went to Birmingham, which we did on occasion. But yeah, so to see a monumental structure like that in a rural setting, I think it is powerful and it's mystifying and inspires awe. So it's no wonder songwriters and novelist would want to write about it.

Chuck Reece (30:51):

As you've explored this topic over your life and then leading up to and into the writing of your first novel Treeborne, what were some of the works of art and history that you found valuable to you?

Caleb Johnson (31:07):

A lot of it was family history. I did some reading of nonfiction books and scholarly and historical pieces in writing Treeborne. But really a lot of it for me was family history. It was center of the table with my grandmama and listening to her talk about exploring the hollers and hills and woods where we're from before the city river was ever backed up and Smith Lake created. It was listening to her tell stories about the dam being built and how fast the water rose or didn't rise and people coming to watch the water rise. Ferries being built to cross the lake before the bridges were finished.

Caleb Johnson (31:55):

It was just a time that for whatever reason, I romanticized in a way probably because I heard it talked about a lot. When I started writing the novel, what really hooked me because so much of Treeborne to me is about memory and how memories change the more we handle them. How they can be faulty. They can be used to say something that you otherwise couldn't say. And what really kind of got me when I was working on Treeborne was, I would listen to my grandmama tell these stories of before the dam, before the lake, and my mom would be sitting there too.

Caleb Johnson (32:30):

And, every once in a while, my grandmama maybe couldn't remember or she'd pause or be struggling to recall something and my mom would jump in and pick up the story with this memory or this moment, this story as if it was hers. And she was born right when the dam was being finished. So she has no memories of this time at all, but she had heard these stories and memories be passed down so much and she had absorbed the pictures, and the family history to where it was real to her. It had become a memory of hers as well. And that kind of notion fascinated me and I wanted to explore it in book form.

Chuck Reece (33:09):

Well, I read your book and if you haven't read *Treeborne*, I don't want you to make the mistake of thinking that you would be reading a historical novel about the progress of the TVA, because *Treeborne* is something way, way different from that.

Caleb Johnson (33:30):

Yeah. It's a mythologized version of that history for sure. There are inaccuracies that are intentional, there are supernatural elements introduced to kind of muddy the water of what's real and what's not real. And there are things taken straight from my family history, and there are seeds taken from my family history that I've offered.

Caleb Johnson (33:50):

I wanted to do that because writers I admire have done similar things. The kind of touched on always go back to for this book is actually not a Southern writer but a South American writer, Gabriel García Márquez. And so his novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was just such a touchstone for me as a reader and as a writer for *Treeborne*. The way he took his grandmother's stories from this small village near the coast of Columbia and created this fictional town of Macondo and the people in it and all the tragedies and losses and celebrations and gifts that came to them along the way. I wanted to kind of do an Alabama version of that.

Caleb Johnson (34:38):

And lately, Chuck, when people have asked me ... When they find out I've written a novel and they say, "Oh, well, what's it about?" As you know, having read it, *Treeborne* is kind of difficult to encapsulate in a few sentences. So what I've been saying lately, when someone says, "what's your novel about?" I say, "It's a redneck version of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*." And I just leave it at that.

Chuck Reece (34:58):

I love that. I pimped up your book to a lot of people in a lot of different conversations since it came out, and they were like, "Okay, why do I have to read it?" And I go, "well, it's kind of like Gabriel García Márquez" set in the South. It's redneck magical realism in a way. It's like, I almost think that if the South had a film director comparable to the Guillermo Del Toro, this thing would already be in production as a movie.

Caleb Johnson (35:37):

That's how it plays in my book. And I wish we did. I'm sure they're out there, this film maker. Maybe they're just not to the point where they can make one yet. So if they're listening, any aspiring filmmakers or working filmmakers, I would love it. That sounds like a great thing to me.

Chuck Reece (35:56):

Spreading the art inspired by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Our thanks to Bitter Southerner contributor, Caleb Johnson, author of the novel, Treeborne. Y'all really need to read it. It's great writing. And if you're looking for Caleb these days, you'll find him in Boone North Carolina teaching writing to some lucky students at Appalachian State University.

Chuck Reece (36:26):

Now, Caleb learned about communities lost by TVA dams through his family's own stories. And that's also how one of our podcast listeners learned about that history. Royanne Baer lives in Jonesborough, Tennessee and she says her mom grew up in Kuttawa, Kentucky. But their family had to move in the 1960s because the development of TVA's Barclay Dam.

Royanne Baer (36:48):

Parts of the town were moved from their original location and what is commonly referred to as old Kuttawa to what is now referred to as new Kuttawa.

Chuck Reece (37:00):

The family had a general store in home and the home was ultimately relocated to a new part of town.

Royanne Baer (37:05):

My grandmother had the house physically moved from old Kuttawa to new Kuttawa. They chose what I guess would have been considered a prime site. It was the highest point in the new town.

Chuck Reece (37:24):

Years later, Royanne says, she and her mom would stop at the home's original location.

Royanne Baer (37:29):

We would drive into old Kuttawa, and we would always stop, and we could get out and there were two trees that marked where they sat, she always said they sat in her front yard. And they were right at the edge of the water and she would walk through what little bit of the property she could. But most of their property was submerged.

Chuck Reece (37:52):

Now, unlike some communities flooded by the TVA, parts of Kuttawa stayed the same.

Royanne Baer (37:59):

They didn't have to move the cemetery. The cemetery sat up on the hill, and so it's still there in old Kuttawa.

Chuck Reece (38:09):

Now as people left old Kuttawa, even to resettle just a few miles away, the character of the original town was changed forever. Royanne says, there's no question that the TVA improved the lives of so many people by expanding hydroelectricity. But for her, it is heartbreaking to think about all that the earlier generations, including her mom's lost in the process.

Royanne Baer (38:34):

Her childhood home is still standing, it's just not on the land that she ran around down as a child. It's not the land where she went out and caught lightning bugs. In my mind, one as someone who loves and appreciates history too, as someone who's from the South, where I think as a people, we're really tied into our land, I cannot imagine what my mother and her sisters had to experience.

Chuck Reece (39:06):

Now thanks to Royanne Baer who knows in Jonesborough Tennessee for sharing her family's story. And stories like that, or the community's disrupted by the TVA live on in every Southern generation. They're in the stories we tell and an art we make. And we shared a lot of examples of both of those with you, but we've got one more piece of art that we want to include. It's a moving song called Hazel Creek by the Nashville based group, Grandville Automatic. Now, Hazel Creek was an actual North Carolina town that was submerged by flooding from the TVA's Fontana Dam. We asked the two members of Grandville Automatic to tell us about their song, Hazel Creek.

Vanessa Olivarez (39:45):

Hello, my name is Vanessa Olivarez and I'm half the band Granville Automatic.

Vanessa Olivarez (39:52):

Granville Automatic as a band has a tendency to seek out stories that are very weighted in sadness. This was a story that definitely appealed to us because of the underlying theme of loss that's consistently there. People losing their homes and never being able to return.

Vanessa Olivarez (40:27):

(singing).

Elizabeth Elkins (40:35):

My name is Elizabeth Elkins. I'm part of the band Grandville Automatic. When we go to research our songs, we often look for first person stories from that time, and we really try to get inside one person's head and sort of make some guesses on the emotion. But this was a newspaper article that we came across, about a woman whose dad just started drinking when they had to leave. And so there's moonshine in my father's eyes is a line in the chorus, and it just focuses on that moment of letting go of the town. And she's younger, she's moving. But for her father, he can't move on.

Vanessa Olivarez (41:15):

(singing).

Vanessa Olivarez (41:30):

Driving near those places and just knowing that there's something, it's like Atlantis, you know. Underneath it, it just makes me wonder about what was there and the little pieces of history that everyone experienced within the town and how that's just no longer, how do you erase an entire town? It's so weird.

Elizabeth Elkins (41:51):

For me, there's a moment in the second verse where one of the stories we found in the newspaper was, this woman had two brothers who had gone and fought in World War II. One came home, one didn't. And the fact that they were out fighting for the United States in the war while at home, their home town was being destroyed to basically provide power for Alcoa and for Oak Ridge. For one of them to give up their life so that this father loses his son and his hometown, in both cases for the sake of American progress. So to me, that second verse is very compelling.

Vanessa Olivarez (42:55):

(singing).

Vanessa Olivarez (43:04):

What was so appealing to me visually about the story was the thought about grave site and how you pass them every day and you can see evidence of people that loved these people. And I think when I think about Hazel Creek and I think about these tiny towns where people can't go back and they can't lay flowers on their loved ones graves, it makes me think about all of these graves left undecorated and how sad that must be.

Vanessa Olivarez (44:09):

(singing).

Elizabeth Elkins (44:09):

I hope people take away this idea that the visual is not the whole story. You see this beautiful lake, but people do, they go to jet ski and have fun and fish and hang out and they're one of most popular recreational things, especially in the South. And I think we take things for granted like electricity, and we don't think of the impact that something that big had on so many people's lives. And it does resonate. I mean, I feel like the TVA and it's a very big part of Southern life. I have such a love/hate relationship with the entire concept.

Chuck Reece (44:45):

Our thanks to Elizabeth Elkins and Vanessa Olivarez of Grandville Automatic for taking us back in time to Hazel Creek, North Carolina.

Chuck Reece (45:17):

And we have one more bit of time traveling we need to do before we end this particular show. Months ago when we first began building this episode, we hope to find someone's still alive who actually remembered losing their home to the TVA, and who might be willing and able to talk to us. I called one of our contributors in North Carolina mountains about Lake Chateau, Marianne Leek. I hoped that she might know someone or might know someone else who did. Marianne called me back soon to tell me that she had found a woman named Muriel Doyle Blankenship, who was 14 years old when her family was forced to leave the elf community in Clay County, North Carolina.

Chuck Reece (46:00):

Now, after the TVA completed the Chateau Dam and 1942, Lake Chateau swallowed the Doyle family home. This is Marianne talking to Ms. Blankenship, who was 92 years old at the time last year.

Marianne:

“Is it Muriel Doyle Blankenship?”

Muriel:

“That’s right. And married Joe Blankenship.

Marianne:

Married Joe Blankenship.

Muriel:

That has to be in there.

Marianne:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Chuck Reece (46:30):

Now, Muriel Doyle was married to her late husband Joe Blankenship for nearly 60 years. The two got married shortly after graduating from high school, and at that point it was only a few years beyond when Muriel left her childhood home in Elf. Muriel's son, one of Marianne's neighbors had told her that his mama didn't even have one photograph of the home that she'd grown up in. But as you've already learned this episode, the TVA kept meticulous records. So we dug into those records and actually found a picture of the house snapped by a TVA fieldworker.

Chuck Reece (47:06):

Now listen, as Ms. Blankenship sees her childhood home for the first time in nearly 80 years.

Muriel Doyle Blankenship (47:14):

This house we lived in. It ain't hardly a house.”

Marianne Leek (47:19):

Can you tell me about this house?

Muriel Doyle Blankenship (47:21):

And the roof had cracks in it. And the snow went through the cracks. But that was a blessing though.

Marianne Leek (47:30):

Why was that a blessing?

Muriel Doyle Blankenship (47:32):

Because we had a roof over our head.

Marianne Leek (47:34):

That's true.

Muriel Doyle Blankenship (47:36):

It's all we had.

Marianne Leek (47:37):

Yeah.

Chuck Reece (47:38):

And if you didn't catch all that, Ms. Blankenship says that the roof had cracks in it that led the snow fall through, but she saw that as a blessing. Why? Because we had a roof over our heads. It's all we had.

Marianne Leek (47:54):

How many rooms were in the home? Do you remember?

Muriel Doyle Blankenship (47:57):

Two bedrooms. Too many people.

Chuck Reece (48:06):

Muriel Doyle Blankenship had eight siblings and a single mom, and they slept four to a bed.

Muriel Doyle Blankenship (48:13):

Now as a family, let's see, Rosie, Maura, Virginia, me and Veda.

Chuck Reece (48:23):

In the months before the family's December, 1941 relocation, a TVA representative visited Muriel's mother seven times the records tell us. Now after his first home visit, he wrote that he did "not know how this family manages to exist". Like other residents in the Tennessee Valley, they were ultimately forced to leave. The United States government, paid the Doyle family \$405 for their home.

Muriel Doyle Blankenship (48:54):

They didn't [inaudible 00:48:56] the money. They give her \$405 for the home.

Marianne Leek (49:01):

Yeah. You're right.

Chuck Reece (49:04):

According to the TVA records, the family was willing to cooperate in every way possible to move, but at the same time they were frightened at the prospect of the removal and the relocation.

Chuck Reece (49:15):

Ms. Blankenship told Marianne that their whole family was apprehensive about the unknown, but to the youngest children, it felt like something of an adventure. Ms. Blankenship told Maryann about the first time she took her siblings to the shores of the brand new Lake Chateau. When Maryanne asked her what she did when she got there, Muriel's answer came quick and fast. "I jumped right in."

Chuck Reece (49:41):

Well, two months and three days after Marianne interviewed Muriel and showed her that picture, Ms. Blankenship passed away. So we dedicate this episode with love to the memory with Ms. Muriel Doyle Blankenship.

Chuck Reece (50:03):

That's it for us today y'all. Sean Powers produces all these shenanigans and Josephine Bennett is our wise editor. If you want to read Marianne Leek's story about her visit with Muriel Blankenship, it's called 'when the TVA came to town,' and there's a convenient link for it on our website in the show notes for this episode. That's where you can also get linked to Dangerous Waters, Micah Cash's photo essay on how the South was transformed by the TVA. And finally, we posted all the TVA songs we've been playing for you to a play list, as well as links to PDF files and the TVA's complete records on Muriel Doyle's family and Mattie Randolph's family.

Chuck Reece (50:46):

Our thanks go out to the authors who appeared on this episode, Lisa Russell and Caleb Johnson. Our thanks go out to the voice actors, Jessica Guerrero who played the part of Mattie Randolph, and John Weatherford, whose voice is no doubt familiar to our listeners in Atlanta. And thanks to the songwriters, first of all, Mike Cooley. Ever South, our theme song was written by Patterson Hood and the band that he and Mike founded, The Drive-by Truckers. And to Elizabeth Elkins and Vanessa Olivarez of Grandville Automatic for talking with us about their great song Hazel Creek.

Chuck Reece (51:27):

We are additional tracks from Dwarf music. If you like the Bitter Southerner podcast, please review it and read it on Apple podcast, even if you listen to it somewhere else. Those reviews on Apple podcasts warm our hearts and they attract others to hear what we're talking about.

Chuck Reece (51:44):

Our show is a co-production of Georgia Public Broadcasting and the Bitter Southerner Magazine. You can access more from each episode at gpb.org/podcast. I'm Chuck Reece and my three instructions remain constant. Hug more necks, bide no hatred and spend your time doing what you love with who you love. And if that's going to the Lake, that's fine, just give a minute to think about what might be underneath the surface. We'll see y'all in two weeks with our final episode of season two. It is a big one. Stay tuned.