Phone interview with Patricia Ezzell, the historian for the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).

Patricia Ezzell: Hello Pat Bernard Ezzell speaking.

Interviewer: Hi my name is Casey Harvey. I am doing a school history project on the addition of electricity to my town Woodstock, Virginia. I have already tried contacting our local power provider, Dominion, but they have been less than helpful. I was wondering if you could provide some general information on how electricity impacted people in the early twentieth century?

Patricia Ezzel: I can. Have you looked at our website?

Interviewer: Uh. I read through it a little bit.

Patricia Ezzel: Okay.

Interviewer: Especially in the earlier sections when TVA first started.

Patricia Ezzel: Okay, so you did look at the history page?

Interviewer: Yes.

Patricia Ezzel: Okay. There are some nice articles. Did you find the heritage archives?

Interviewer: No.

Patricia Ezzel: Okay if you go to the TVA history page. There is a little box. And about TVA history. Over on the right side it says TVA heritage. And there is a link TVA heritage offers fascinating glance of the agency’s 75 year history. It is a little dated since it is almost 80. There is a lot of really neat articles in there about when TVA was just starting. There is a lot of really good information there. There are all kinds of things. Different ones that I would recommend is “The Father of Public Power”, “The Great Experiment”, um, there is one about the town of Norris which is a good one to see what TVA was doing at the time. Um. I am trying to figure out which one that is.

Interviewer: I think it is the “American Ideal.”

Patricia Ezzell: And the “Perpetual Fire” is a good one to get a sense of what relocation was like. That is some stuff that you can have that is useful. And there is another website that is not a TVA website, that is called the New Deal Network. So if you go to Google and you type in the New Deal Network. Or whatever you like to use. It doesn’t have to be Google. Alright go to New Deal Network and you click on that. And they have, I believe it is called New Deal Classroom. Actually they have a search box so if you can just put in TVA and you go. And it will have everything they have related to TVA. Um, that is a nice place to get a lot of information. Let me just check though. I think it is… They used to have a little thing right on there, right on the front page. But it looks like they have changed it. I guess the best tool would just be to put TVA in do that search. And you get 377 results. Let’s see if I look real quick. They have just a lot of nice photos. So, I would encourage you to look around on that site.

Interviewer: Okay.

Patricia Ezzel: They have basically they have the stuff on our website gives you a little bit of an interview. I am trying to think of other things that would be easier for you to access. Uh, why don’t you check those things out? If you have some specific questions…

Interviewer: I have a few specific questions already, if you have a second.?

Patricia Ezzel: Sure.

Interviewer: I know in our community, electricity came to the town first as opposed to the rural community. Is that often common?

Patricia Ezzel: Well it was pretty common. Because basically you had electricity when TVA was created but mainly you had those in the larger urban areas. So Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville would have had power. There was the Tennessee Electric Power Company which was a large private company that provided electricity to a lot of those areas. Now where you didn’t have electricity was in the rural areas. And that’s one of the things that TVA did, was to provide electricity to those rural farmers. And part of that came from the idea of TVA. George Norris, who was a big proponent of TVA, and proposed the TVA act to congress on multiple times, and it finally pass in ’33. He was a big proponent of rural electrification and that was part of what they saw TVA, as this great experiment, doing as providing that much needed electricity. It was so expensive to get it run out to the rural areas. That is why it was primarily in the cities. But yes that is the long answer to your question, but yes it was common.

Interviewer: In our community we had a couple really small private electric companies. So when TVA or another large company would come, how would they integrate small companies into the grid?

Patricia Ezzel: Well when TVA was created in the ‘30s, municipalities and cooperatives were formed to purchase electricity. Like TVA would provide a contract to like Toopilo, which was the first municipality that we sold power to we had a power contract about how we would provide a service to that town, and cooperatives were a people coming together to form this cooperative to buy electricity for this rural area usually and that is how that worked. Now in some cases, for example with the Tennessee Electric Power Company there were a couple Supreme Court cases, well there was a Supreme Court case to determine the constitutionality of TVA and once that was that case was settled TVA ended up purchasing the Tennessee Electric Power Company for about 39 million dollars, or something like that, multiple million dollars. And that took place in ’39. I would have to look up how many millions of dollars. But, anyway, that was towards the end of the thirties, TVA acquired one of the largest competitors it had in its service areas. And that was another way. But primarily they provided power contracts municipalities and cooperatives to distribute the electricity.

Interviewer: What are some key changes that most rural people would experience when electricity would come to their area?

Patricia Ezzel: Oh, my gosh. I mean, lights. The ability to have electricity around to their barn. So they were no longer confined to do certain types of chores by dusk and dawn. That really opened their day up. They also, of course, had running water electricity. They also had a lot of ease to their lifestyle. I mean it was a hard living. But electricity made their quality of life better. There were certain electric appliances they could now have. Certainly it changed their quality of life, for the better.

Interviewer: I saw in several videos made in the 1940s and 50s on rural electrification, that they showed farmers suddenly had cars and things after they received electricity, is that accurate? I didn’t know if they were showing more modern things coming.

Patricia Ezzel: That they suddenly had cars?

Interviewer: It seemed to me like in one scene they are cutting down the corn by hand and then electricity came and then they had a tractor. It just didn’t seem very accurately portrayed. The video was called Power and the Land and was published in 1940.

Patricia Ezzel: There is not. The car would have to do would have to do with their income. I mean it is not directly tied.

Interviewer: So maybe with electricity their income would have increased?

Patricia Ezzel: If you think about how they would have to do their work. It would probably increase productivity which would increase income so they could have afforded to buy other things like that. I mean that is just basic economics. I am sure in the video they are just trying to portray moving forward and progressivism and that sort of thing. So you are going to see moving towards a more modern era. So you are going to see moving towards a more modern era. I mean here in the valley before TVA came in the average per capita income was $168. So it was lower than national average.

Interviewer: And you mention electric cooperatives, what was the benefit of the farmers owning the company themselves versus a large company selling them power?

Patricia Ezzel: Well, they had control. People like to have control. They decide how where the lines are going to go and how they are going to get it. They negotiate the payments and all that kind of stuff. There is certain ownership with that and with ownership comes certain responsibility.

Interviewer: So when the farmers would own the companies themselves, they would have to go out maintain the lines if they came down?

Patricia Ezzel: No, no I am not saying that. I am just saying they are responsible; those cooperatives are responsible, for negotiating the contract TVA. And getting the best deal they could get for the folks and that cooperative. And they know where their needs are. So they are deciding what they need as opposed to someone telling them. They are the decisions makers, within the framework that they are working in. I mean obviously TVA is not going, there is an area they are going to negotiate in. They aren’t going to go below that.

Interviewer: And when you are doing your research do you often find historical documents, I know TVA was heavily funded by the government, so does most of your research focus on government documents? Because I am trying to find how Dominion, or VEPCO, came to our area. But I am finding very little from the community or Dominion itself.

Patricia Ezzel: Most of the stuff I have is TVA generated documents. Where is Dominion located?

Interviewer: It is mostly, not necessarily northern, more like North Western Virginia and Ohio.

Patricia Ezzel: Okay.

Interviewer: They have been less than helpful.

Patricia Ezzel: Let me think here. And they don’t have very much online?

Interviewer: They have one history section. And I have tried calling and asking who wrote the history section or who they sub-contracted to write the history section and they just keep referencing me back to that one page. And I have already seen it.

Patricia Ezzel: Let me look at it real quick. Will that get me to it, Dominion Power?

Interviewer: Yeah, I think the website is dom dot com.

Patricia Ezzel: Here we go. And let’s see. About Dominion. And where did you look? Did you just type it in the search bar?

Interviewer: I think I just typed in Dominion history.

Patricia Ezzel: History timeline. Is that what you saw?

Interviewer: I am at About. And the web address is dom.com/about/dominion-history.jsp. I might have just Googled it and somehow gotten here.

Patricia Ezzel: Let’s see. Lesson One. Oh well red tail white fires. Handout introducing Tuskegee airmen. I don’t know how that is related. Let me go back. That is kind of funny. Okay About Dominion. “A hundred years and going strong Dominion,” let’s see what that is about. You can purchase their one hundred year commemorative book. “Hundred year journey audio file”, that might be worth listening too. Did you see this section?

Interviewer: I saw a video on their hundredth anniversary but there wasn’t much to it. There was maybe like two minutes.

Patricia Ezzel: They do have some sources here, “The Past-Interesting, The Present-Intriguing, the Future-Bright; a story of Virginia Electric and Power Company (1965)”, “The Story of a Consolidated Natural Gas Company.” So I guess Dominion has acquired all of these other companies. The East Ohio Gas Company and the Hope Natural Gas

Interviewer: I have the first document.

Patricia Ezzel: I don’t know if. Does Virginia? Tennessee did an encyclopedia of history and culture a couple years ago. I don’t know if Virginia has one of those. Ours was online. Let me just check. You might could look up utility or electric utility. Virginia Encyclopedia. I know Kentucky did one. They were kind of popular a few years ago. They do have it online. Encyclopedia Virginia

Interviewer: Is it the encyclopediavirginia.org

Patricia Ezzel: Yes. Have you looked around there?

Interviewer: No but I have it up right now.

Patricia Ezzel: Yeah look around there. I don’t know. You will have to see how it is laid out. If there is a section on industry or if it is all subject oriented. I am looking at D, and you would think they would have Dominion, but I don’t see it.

Interviewer: Most of the things look like names… I guess there is desegregation. I will look around on here.

Patricia Ezzel: Look around on that and see. It seems to me they would have environment exploration. You think they would have something on industry. I saw economic development. Let’s see what they have on there. Dan River Mills, Great Depression in Virginia; that might give you a sense. It looks like you will just have to look through that. It is kind of laid out in a different way. But maybe somewhere they have an overview page that tells you how it is laid out. But anyway hopefully that will be helpful.

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

Patricia Ezzel: If you have other questions, give me a call.

Interviewer: Will do, thanks.