

Deco Bookshelf: New Deal in Tennessee

By Jim Sweeney

The New Deal is history, but it's definitely part of the present, as shown by *Tennessee's New Deal Landscape: A Guidebook* by Carroll Van West (University of Tennessee Press, \$18.50 paperback, \$40 hardcover). He documents the massive impact Depression-era projects had on the state's government and economy, impacts that last to this day.

In the early 21st century, thousands of Tennessee children attend schools built with New Deal funds, Van West notes. Hundreds of state and local employees work in New Deal-era buildings.

In an era when, in some political circles, it's fashionable to trash FDR and the New Deal as outmoded symbols of a big government we no longer need, it's worth considering Van West's point.

The New Deal agencies "transformed the state's public landscape," Van West says. Often the transformation is more subtle--and more massive--than just a new courthouse or a bridge. It includes changes in the way farming was done, and how government operated. The New Deal agencies helped open up Tennessee to industrialization, by providing large power plants, courtesy of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

One of the state's biggest New Deal projects is Great Smoky Mountains National Park, one of the five most-visited national parks. The economic impact of the park's many visitors is a major reason that Tennessee does not have an income tax, according to an unofficial web site that promotes the park and surrounding communities.

The book isn't a comprehensive touring guide. Van West, who is projects director for Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation, highlights 250 representative projects and places. For the buildings, he includes an address, date, architect if known, and photos of many structures.

Van West doesn't ignore the negative impacts of New Deal projects, including population displacement and demolition of existing structures. By

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1946, TVA had 1.1 million acres, and had removed 72,000 people from their land.

Other parks and land projects had similar impacts, displacing many people, even entire towns. The National Park Service wanted nature to be the focus of its lands, so it demolished most structures within areas it took over, even historic structures.

The New Deal agencies also couldn't get around the racial politics of the South. African-Americans benefited far less from New Deal projects, and New Deal buildings continued policies of segregation. Two public parks were set up for blacks only; the rest were "basically off limits" to blacks.

Many of the projects had mixed impact. The 1938 Davidson County Public Building and Courthouse was Nashville's first building with central air conditioning. On the other hand, Van West notes, its construction required destruction of a Greek Revival masterpiece. Related federal projects resulted in the demolition of almost every historic building on Public Square, leaving the courthouse isolated.

Federal agencies helped to restore land that had been ruined by erosion and poor agricultural practices. A 1935 Agriculture Department report said "less than 4 million acres of the state's total of almost 27 million acres of farmland and forests were undamaged." The TVA planted 50 million trees by 1939.

But well-meaning Agriculture scientists introduced kudzu as ground cover. It has since become a major pest.

The New Deal projects also weren't immune to politics. The state's Sen. Kenneth McKellar was chairman of the post office committee and a ranking member of the appropriations committee.

So the state was "well positioned to receive more than its fair share of new postal facilities," Van West says. The scores of federally constructed post offices are "both the most obvious and the most lasting New Deal legacy across the state."

By 1938, various New Deal agencies had spent \$22 million in Memphis, in large part due to the clout of the city's political machine. A flood control program later added another \$13 million there.

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Memphis's undue influence over New Deal funds is illustrated by its Art Deco dog shelter, Van West says, suggesting that "no project was too small or inconsequential to receive funding" if it was in Memphis. The state government also comes in for criticism in the book. The legislature and governors didn't want to spend state money on relief projects. The Tennessee Emergency Relief Administration spent \$30 million in one year; 98% of the funds came from the federal treasury. TERA "kept thousands of citizens from homelessness and starvation in the early years of the New Deal," Van West says.

Van West's conclusion is that "Tennessee benefited significantly from the New Deal." The state "received thousands of miles of new roads, thousands of acres of restored land and forests, new lakes, huge new parks, hundreds of new schools, modern airports, many new buildings for community revitalization, and a modern electrical production and distribution network."

Even if a community's only New Deal project was a new school, that had a broad impact, Van West says. The school would have a library, electricity, sanitary restrooms, physical education facilities, a lunch room for hot meals. "The building was a demonstration of the amenities, and the necessity of modern technology, for a productive life," Van West says.

By 1938, the Works Progress Administration had built 123 new schools and renovated 480 schools. Federal programs also funded textbooks and library books.

People know a handful of New Deal agencies and projects. The WPA brought New Deal benefits "to almost every town and village in Tennessee," the book says, but there were many agencies and many projects.

The National Youth Administration provided Van Buren County with its first public high school. The NYA also built the 1938 Gibson County Central Library in Trenton; it was one of the state's first central libraries in a rural area. Van West stresses the importance of looking beyond individual projects, important as they may be for a community. He cites historian Roger Biles, who says that the New Deal "transformed southern agriculture from a plantation-dominated system to modern agribusiness."

The New Deal, Van West goes on, "created a foundation for the region's tourism industry and spurred larger industrial investments due to the re-

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gion's improved transportation and utility systems. These years spurred urban growth and established the first large public housing projects in the cities."

New Deal agencies also upgraded municipal utility systems and basic infrastructure. The WPA installed Woodbury's first concrete sidewalks in the late 1930s. Van West quotes the county historian as saying that Woodbury made more progress in the Depression years than it had in the previous hundred years.

These types of improvements are much less visible than dams or courthouses, Van West says, but just as important. Van West says the transportation network was a major focus of New Deal agencies in Tennessee. One reason was that a 1931 political dispute "had almost totally eliminated the state highway department, leading to the layoff of four thousand workers." Many of the hundreds of bridges the New Deal agencies built are still in use, he notes.

Many New Deal projects symbolize changes in government, Van West says. Until the state office building and the state Supreme Court building were built in Nashville in the 1940s, the entire state government was housed in the Capitol. "The new buildings reflected the expansion of state government in response to" New Deal programs, he says. Local projects often centralized county or municipal agencies in one large building, becoming a symbol of an expanding government presence in people's lives.

While many buildings were traditional or Colonial revival in style, the New Deal projects included Deco buildings. Van West mentions that many of the new armories were "striking" Art Deco buildings, although unfortunately there are no photos of them.

The 1937 Franklin County Courthouse in Winchester features a central clock tower. The three-story limestone building is set on a landscaped terrace five feet above the street, making it more prominent. The post offices often included murals or other art reflecting local history or industry. As in most states, there were sometimes disputes over subject matter or other details.

Treasury supervisors questioned Carl Nyquist's design for a mural on picking cotton for Bolivar's post office because all the cotton pickers

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were white. They were assured there were some white cotton pickers there. But Van West notes it would have been far more accurate to show some black cotton pickers.

The 1935 post office in Lewisburg, now the office of the local newspaper, has a mural showing pioneers crossing mountains. Van West thinks it's an odd choice of subject, considering that Lewisburg isn't in the mountains. While post offices tended to be architecturally conservative, the modernist style of TVA dams had a "significant" impact on American architecture, Van West argues. He says it's worth noting that in Kenneth Frampton's 1980 "Modern Architecture," the only example from Tennessee is Norris Dam.

TVA was also on the cutting edge in community design. Some of the communities that the agency built for its workers had greenbelt buffers. TVA also told construction crews to keep as many trees as possible on lots. That would be considered radical planning in many communities even today.

While the major federal parklands, such as Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Cherokee National Forest, were a major accomplishment, the New Deal agencies also had a major impact on state parks.

Van West cites the amazing fact that in 1921 Tennessee had no state parks. In 1925 the state established a parks commission, but it did almost nothing. The state park system, now considered "one of the true jewels of the state's public landscape," is largely due to the New Deal agencies.