

For the Joy of the Journey
A personal memoir

CHAPTER 2 - On The Reservation

Dad worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority. He had worked for TVA for number of years on construction, probably from around 1930. He was able to secure a salaried job with power operations near the time I was born 1942. One of the benefits of his Power Operations job included employee housing located on the TVA reservation at Wilson Dam. My first memories are of the our house and four others on the south side of Wilson Dam. Dad's office building was a 100 yards or so from our front door. A railroad track for a switch engine used for the dam's power house ran in front of our hose. I remember "driving" the engine with Dad.

The houses on the south side of the dam were located on a steep cliff . There was a 75' +/- drop to the river bed below and which was negotiated by climbing down a cable. Because it was the shortest access to the river and fishing below the dam, Dad would climb down and back with his fishing gear and occasionally take with him. As best I can recall, our house was several hundred feet from the cliff. I learned early that I was never to go there by myself.



Our house was similar to the other four. All were probably around 1200 sq ft (?). Ours was heated by a coal furnace in the basement. The heat came into the upstairs through a single large grate in the center of the house. I remember that because I forgot and stepped on the grate barefooted during the winter and burned the bottom of my feet. There was a roomy front porch and yard and trees to play in. The last time I visited the site, 40 years or so later, the dogwood tree I loved to climb was still there. It was in that tree a terrifying experience occurred. Climbing up as far as could, as usually did, I stepped into the crotch of a limb and my shoe wedged so tightly I could not remove it. Despite my desperate efforts, I could not free myself. I panicked and began crying for help, to avail. I still remember the fear and helplessness. It is not clear how it happened but my dad came from his work and pulled me free and let me down.

Our nearest neighbor had one son my age and we became close friends. There was a girl my age on the other side. We did not become close friends. For reasons I do not remember, she bit me on my stomach and drew blood. Our relationship soured.

Dad bought Mother a wringer washer that replaced the tub and washboard she had been using. Wringer washers were hazardous. Clothes were first washed in the tub and then fed through the wringer (rollers) to press out the water. The rollers were powered and if not careful fingers or hands/arms could be pulled into them. There was an occasion that Mother had her arm caught in the rollers. I remember it being a pretty serious incident.

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One neighbor had a chicken pen. My curiosity got the better of me and I enter the pen and was met by an angry rooster who immediately flogged me. It was a lesson never forgotten.

TVA property was called a reservation because it was federal land. Living on the reservation meant you were exempt from state and local laws and only subject to Federal statutes. I have often thought about what opportunities that might have offered. I did mean that you did not have to have a driver's license to operate a car, which enabled my mother to drive on the reservation.

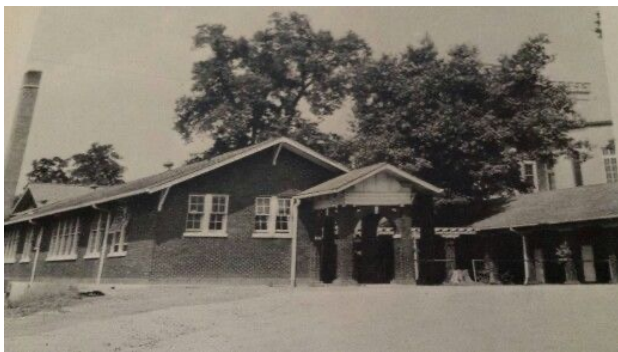
I learned to swim while we lived on the south side of the dam. A slough convenient for swimming was located near our home. As I recall, Dad routinely took me there to swim, always with a life vest on. After some time, we went to swim but that time we went out on a barge tied up in the slough. My memory is I was standing at least ten feet above the water. Dad told me to take off my life vest and told me it was time to swim on my own. He proceeded to toss me into the water and I swam on my own, dog paddling furiously to the near by shore.

Living on the reservation was idyllic in my memory. The experience continued when we moved to the north side of Wilson Dam where there was a larger community of TVA housing.



I believe we moved so that I would be able to attend school in Florence. There were no schools in close proximity to our house on the south side. It is not clear to me where I attended first grade. Most likely, it was the Wilson Dam school located on the reservation. I have no memories of my first grade experience.

I do remember second grade. I attended Kilby Training School at Florence State Teachers College in Florence. My teacher was



Mrs. Cox and I loved her. There were two particular events that were significant. Not long after arriving at Kilby our class was out for recess on the playground. I remember being deeply engrossed in whatever activity was going on and failed to notice that my classmates had returned to the classroom. Realizing that I would have to enter the classroom in front of all my classmates, I was mortified at the prospect of humiliation. To

my relief, Mrs. Cox realized what had happened and greeted me and deflected any embarrassment.

The second vivid memory of my second grade experience is me and a couple of buddies' trip to the principals office. As I recall, the three of us went to the restroom together. The restroom was heated by hot water radiators. For reasons that remain a mystery, we decided that it would be fun to

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pee on the radiators. The results were dramatic, the sounds and smells were delightful. Impressed with our mischief, we gleefully returned to class. The greatest mystery came when we were told to report to the principal's office, where we were confronted about our misdeeds. We survived unscathed, but the knowledge that somehow the principal knew about what we had done became a powerful deterrent against future misdeeds.

It is only recently that I came to understand the elite status of Kilby Training School. Unfortunately, I was not aware of the lengths to which my parents went to assure good outcomes for me.

During the time we lived in the north village, Dad had back surgery. As mentioned earlier, he suffered from back issues since his injury as a young man. The surgery was very significant. A spinal fusion was performed by Dr. Mecham at Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville. I was told, but have not verified, the procedure was one of the first of its kind performed. In any case, the recovery was long. I recall Dad confined to bed for many weeks. Although he had some back problems later in his life, he always deemed the surgery successful and held Dr. Mecham in high regard.

As one of the "Dam Kids", there was no shortage of adventures. The village had lots of children and many places to hold our interest. There was a post office, community center, and a school. The grounds were maintained by TVA with verdant lawns and paved roads. The storm drain systems provided opportunities for exploring scary tunnels.

I recall playing with lots of other kids and having freedom to roam our neighborhood. It was a time of awaking. I don't remember how it came to be known, but one boy had a testicle which had not dropped. Naturally, we were concerned for him and finally convinced him to climb on the roof of a garage and jump off, assuring him the abrupt landing would resolve his deficiency. It did not, luckily he didn't suffer any injury other than his dignity.

Roads were paved with tar and gravel. In the hot summer they would get hot enough to blister your feet and coat them with tar if you didn't keep moving. Bare feet were the custom and a test of bravery was to foot race on the road.

I frequented the surrounding area which included the river navigation locks adjacent to Wilson Dam. There were places to access the river below and above the dam. I wandered about fishing, swimming and exploring, often by myself. In retrospect, my freedom then, would probably result in child endangerment charges today. I was a good swimmer and not afraid to swim alone. One particular incident, which I did not share with my parents, created a healthy respect for the dangers of water that I did not have before.

Fishing above the dam on logs tied together for boat slips, I decided to try a sailor dive, standing with your hands at your side you push off diving head first into the water. I really don't have any explanation for why I decided to do so. When I entered the water the dive propelled me into a

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forward somersault which took me underneath the logs and instead of popping up as expected I was trapped underneath the logs and disoriented. Panic seized and for a few moments I feared I was going to drown. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to push away from the logs and emerged safely. It was a powerful lesson that taught me some much needed humility.

I regularly traveled to the locks to watch tows and barges lock through. I developed relationships with the lock operators. My favorite part of the locking process was watching for the upper gates rise after the barge entered the lock. Often fish would be trapped on the walkway and retrieved.

The time we lived on the reservation was special in many ways. It spanned most of my years as an only child. I have been told that I was a special kid. So special, in fact, that some relatives would shut their blinds and turn off the lights and not answer the door when we came to visit. I feel sure those stories were exaggerated but they probably had some basis in truth. As I have come to realize, my parents probably spoiled me.

After the second grade my life took a drastic turn. First, my Dad was transferred to TVA's Johnsonville Steam Plant in Tennessee. We settled near by in Waverly, Tennessee. Second, and much more significant, was the birth of my brother, William Thomas (Chipper) Ezell. My life as an only child came to an abrupt halt.



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