

# The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway: revolutionizing American commerce

by Vin Berg

It was about the time Jimmy Carter became President of the United States that the railroad bridge connecting Aliceville, Alabama with York to the south, and then on down to Mobile, collapsed under the wheels of a northbound freight. The train just barely made it. The country was not so lucky.

As virtually his first act in office, Carter canceled 12 vital water projects, centered in the Western United States, essential infrastructure for irrigation, drinking supplies, hydro-power, and water transport. The action was a very large lump-sum addition to the unpaid costs of amortization of America's basic infrastructure—a deficit in essential government spending whose current, formidable proportions are documented in recent editions of *EIR*.

It was one of Carter's most effective attacks on the economic future of the nation, as effective in its own sphere as his appointment of Paul Volcker to head the Federal Reserve three years later: The ensuing rise in interest rates made it increasingly impossible for industry and agriculture to profitably finance operations at then-current levels. But Carter's string-pullers also knew that without infrastructure like that represented by the canceled water projects, America's economy would be doomed to the "post-industrial" decline they planned, even were interest rates at their lowest levels in history, instead of their highest. If Volcker imposed sharp and continuing contraction and bankruptcy on the country's farms and factories, Carter's infrastructure policy ripped away at the economy's very foundations—the availability of cost-efficient energy, water, transportation in its many forms—with results which now confront us as a *reduced potential for economic recovery and growth*.

## The Tennessee-Tombigbee

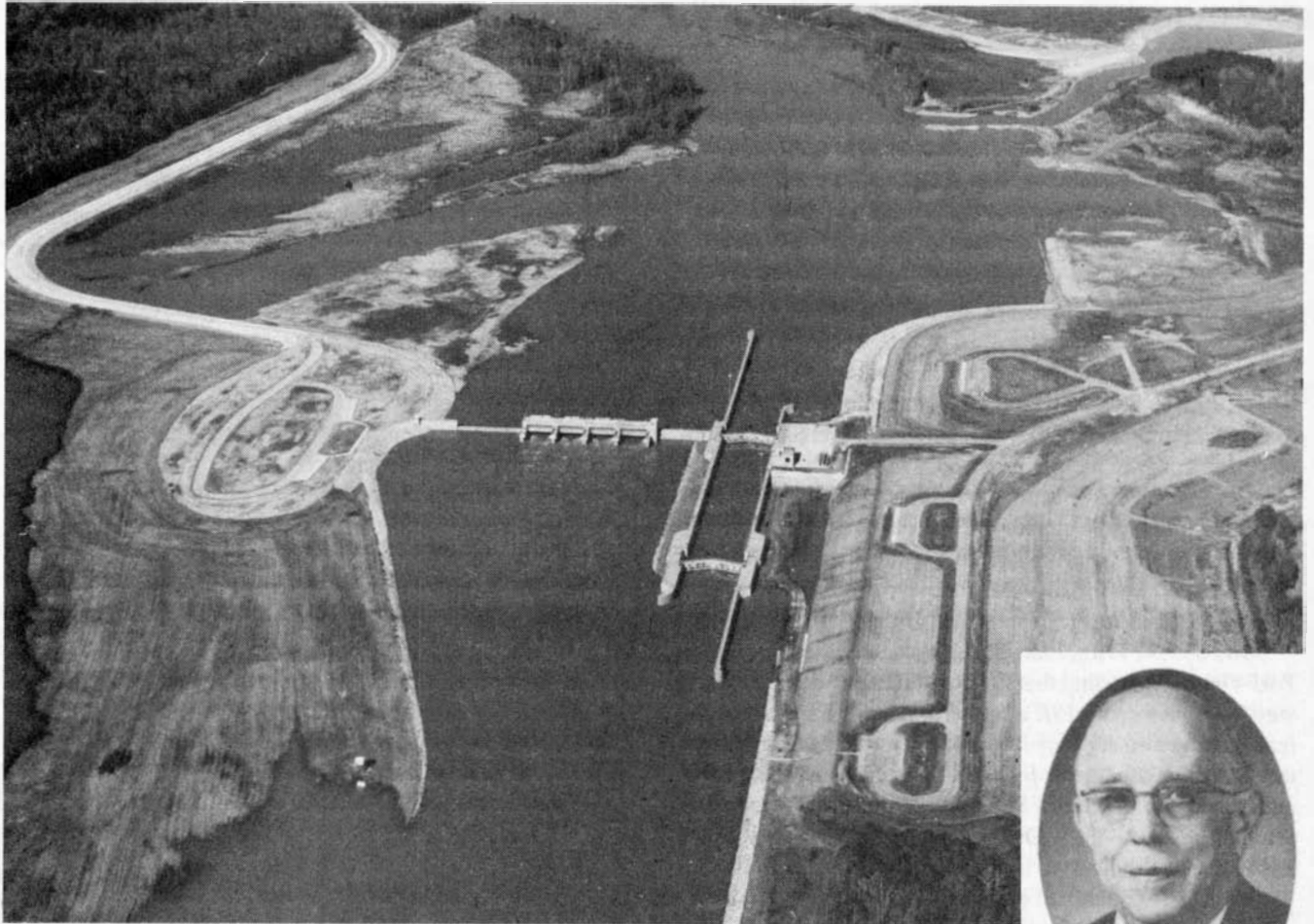
Mayor Roth Hook, City Manager Tommy McKinstry, and other community leaders in Aliceville, Alabama (pop. 3,200) never did get the railroad bridge connecting Aliceville with York rebuilt. A few years ago, government monies were

given to the Louisville and Nashville line for the project, but pleading that financial times were bad, the line got the Federal Transportation Commission to let them pocket the funds. The rail line was ripped up, and Aliceville basically cut off.

And yet, Aliceville, Alabama today is an exception to the rule of depression-ridden pessimism around the country. Times have been tough like anywhere else: Pickens County has lost 50% of its employment in the last three years alone, and many farms have been absorbed into fewer and bigger ones, turned the land over to timbering, or simply shut down. They have felt the sting of the Volcker measures. But—and here's the difference—*this town and the surrounding region escaped the direct effects of Carter's infrastructure policy*.

Aliceville is located in west central Alabama on the Tombigbee River. There is only one major infrastructure project in the last 15 years to escape the budget-cutters' knife: the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. Starting at the Tennessee River in Mississippi, the "Tenn-Tom" slices down through the northeast Mississippi wilderness into the Tombigbee River in Alabama—at Aliceville. The Tombigbee's waters then roll south to the Gulf of Mexico at Mobile. Until now, the water traffic on the 10 principal rivers of the United States has drained into a single river—the Mississippi. But in June 1985, when the President opens the Tenn-Tom in ceremonies at Columbus, Mississippi, the 234-mile navigational channel will provide 14 states served by 16,000 miles of connecting water systems with an improved transportation route bypassing the flat delta land of the south, and increased capital investment which is already following the channel's construction.

One must look back to the Erie Canal of the 1820s, which linked the Atlantic seaboard with the Great Lakes and the Midwest, to appreciate how the Tenn-Tom can transform an entire region—in this case one of the nation's poorest. The Erie Canal not only provided for a vast increase in commerce between East and West, but triggered city-building across



*The lock and dam on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway at Aliceville, Alabama, completed and opened to traffic on Dec. 28, 1979. Inset: Aliceville's Mayor Roth Hook.*

western New York and into the Midwest. Western New York became the nation's breadbasket. Just so, the Tenn-Tom's formal inauguration will not just open a new canal. It will be the opening of an entire river system, changing the geography and commerce of the United States.

As an infrastructure project, the Tennessee-Tombigbee is truly major. Begun in 1971, it is the biggest civil project ever undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. \$1.9 billion in state and federal monies has been expended in its construction. The project's statistics are staggering. One hundred and three contractors were involved; 307 million cubic yards of earth were removed.

ning, it was divided into three sections: a 149-mile "river" section running through Alabama at Aliceville and vicinity; a 46-mile "canal" section in the north in Mississippi; and a 39-mile section channeling through the Tennessee Divide, the rise which separates the Tennessee and Tombigbee valleys. The "divide" section is a major engineering accomplishment, requiring the removal of over 150 million cubic yards of earth, and absorbing fully one-fourth of all construction expenditures.

The result is a channel bigger than the Panama Canal, which will cut more than 875 miles off the present, Mississippi River transport route down from the industrial Midwest to the Gulf of Mexico—with an enormous savings in freight transportation time and costs. It will now be possible to ship steel from Pittsburgh or industrial parts from Chicago, or crushed stone from Louisville, all the way to the Gulf Coast on a streamlined route to Mobile.

A 1976 study by Kearney Management Consultants, under Army Corps contract, evaluated traffic patterns on existing river systems and concluded that over 28 million tons of traffic would use the waterway *in the first year alone*, at savings exceeding \$55 million. The majority of its traffic is expected to be coal, but Kearney found that much grain currently transported by rail to New Orleans and Mobile would instead use the Tenn-Tom at substantial savings—mainly wheat, soybeans, and corn. Other commodity producers who would greatly benefit from the Tenn-Tom include pulp and paper products, chemicals, ores, clay, and concrete. And, as it provides those advantages to the nation's industrial and agricultural heartland, it establishes the basis for indus-

trialization of an entire inland region in the heart of the American south.

"We figure that's why the railroad didn't want to rebuild that bridge," Aliceville's Mayor Hook told *EIR*. "They couldn't compete with what's coming our way."

### The battle for the waterway

But the financial interests behind the railroad weren't out of the picture. Precisely because of the benefits Tenn-Tom will bring, a major effort was set in motion by the Eastern Establishment financier families, using the press, the railroads, "environmentalist" front operations, and the best senators and congressmen money could buy, both "fiscal conservative" and KGB "liberal"—all devoted to killing the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. The Louisville and Nashville railroad took the point in the court battles, which lasted for 12 years, until finally they were forced to drop one last appeal in mid-1983, and the President signed the final appropriations.

On Feb. 17, 1981, John Oakes wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* demanding that President Reagan stop the waterway. Interviewed by *EIR* afterward, he was frank about the reason: "I got most of my information for that editorial from the *Global 2000 Report* [of the Carter administration, proposing the elimination of hundreds of millions of people in the Third World—ed.]. Overpopulation in the Third World and overindustrialization in the industrial world are the gravest threat to our national security."

Or, as Brent Blackwelder of the Environmental Policy Center put it, his outfit opposed all major federal water projects because they "do tend to foster population growth."

Of course, during argument of law suits, they didn't come right out and tell the judge that the Tenn-Tom conflicted with their general policy of genocide and deindustrialization. "The environmentalists argued that the frogs and tadpoles would become extinct—the snail darter and such things in the Tennessee River," reports Aliceville's McKinstry. "The railroad said they have to pay taxes and own property, but no one would have to pay for the Tenn-Tom—basically that it was a boondoggle and they couldn't compete." The railroad also attempted to argue that the waterway would "destabilize the ecosystem" and cause acid drainage problems, while maintaining that with the federal money the Tenn-Tom is receiving, they could expand their facilities to do whatever the Tenn-Tom would.

In fact, there is an important place in the U.S. transportation grid for combining high-speed rail lines and bulk commodity barge shipping. Even if railroads were given assistance to expand and modernize—and they should—rail would not replace, but complement water shipping. Rail's advantage lies in speed. But barge carriers are bulk freight haulers; one barge is able to carry 1,500 tons and travel in a tow of up to 20 others. The average tow of 15 barges carries 22,500 tons, more than twice the tonnage of the average freight train.

Barges get about 514 ton miles to the gallon, while trains get only 202. Hence, water shipping is the most efficient for bulk shipments not requiring particular speed in delivery.

Some of the project's opponents argued in typical "fiscal conservative" fashion against "big government spending"—as if big government spending on infrastructure were not responsible for the greatness of the United States from Alexander Hamilton's time on. By fostering agro-industrial expansion, which means broader state and federal revenue bases, such "big government spending" on infrastructure does not spend a net penny. The government "makes money" on the deal. As West Virginia Democratic Jennings Randolph put it during a 1977 Senate floor debate, "It is not an expenditure. It is an investment in the area and the country." And in truth, the Tennessee-Tombigbee represents exactly the kind of project which strengthens the economy of the nation as a whole. Even the locality it will serve encompasses 16 states.

Some other project opponents argued that it would merely redistribute investment from one area of the country to another, diverting traffic from the Mississippi, depressing that area to the benefit of the Tenn-Tom region. In fact, as McKinstry



The Tennessee-Tombigbee waterway (dotted line) shortens the route to the gulf by 875 miles.

and Hook were quick to point out, the Tenn-Tom, 375 feet across, can handle 8-barge tows, but nothing larger, while the Mississippi has never confronted a tow too big for it—the record being 82 barges. Even the Port of New Orleans publicly supported the project so that some of the pressure on its own facilities, which operate most efficiently handling larger tows, would be relieved. Meanwhile, the Tenn-Tom's "slack water," in contrast to the powerful currents of the Mississippi, will save the smaller-tow tugboats large amounts of fuel.

Malthusian Republican "conservatives" actually led the Senate fight against Tenn-Tom. Senators Alan Simpson (Wyo.), otherwise author of the racist Simpson-Mazzoli anti-immigrant bill, and Pete Domenici (N.M.) under the tutelage of the London School of Economics' Hal Brayman, introduced a measure in March 1981 proposing that the Budget Committee delete 1982 funds for Tenn-Tom. Blackwelder's and other environmentalist groupings backed the effort. Simpson also tried to introduce a measure declaring the Tenn-Tom's 1946 authorization null and void.

Fortunately, the chairman of the Water and Energy Development Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee was Alabama Democrat Tom Bevill, who fought the hardest for the Tenn-Tom and finally managed to push through the final funding by attaching an amendment to a different 1982 appropriations bill. "If he hadn't had the foresight to do that," reports McKinstry, "we never would have made it."

In a 1981 interview with *EIR*, when success was far from assured, Bevill summarized the character of the opposition: "I am glad that these groups didn't get organized for 200 years, because if they did, we'd not have been the most advanced country in the world, we would not have had the highest standard of living, and we wouldn't have been the wealthiest in the world. I have never seen as much misinformation as in the press on Tenn-Tom. The *New York Times* copied misleading information. None of the papers even bothered to call the Army Corps of Engineers. . . ."

## Development of a region

What the Tenn-Tom means for the already-major industrial centers, like Birmingham and Mobile, is clear. They have already attracted a flurry of industrial ventures. The steel center of Birmingham, which has been in steep decline thanks to the Volcker measures, has suffered the additional burden of pollution controls requiring the mills to obtain higher grade coal at prohibitive cost. The Tenn-Tom means sharply reduced coal shipping costs. The city will also become a north-south port. Mobile has invested \$80 million in state-docks expansion, just to handle anticipated coal exports. Chattanooga and Knoxville have also created new port facilities.

What might the Tenn-Tom mean for the smaller towns on the waterway, like Aliceville? Opponents eliminated funds

supplemental to the Tenn-Tom's construction—for town port development, for recreational areas along the waterway, and so forth. Nevertheless, Aliceville's Mayor Hook, McKinstry, and others like them throughout the region, aren't quitters.

As McKinstry reported, "Seven years ago, our industrial development chairman, Carl Chandler, proposed a port be built by the town. We had a local businessman who wanted to build a slit as a private venture, something that could handle just four barges. We said, fine. He built it, and it worked, since some barge traffic has been open to our area for several years. We have already attracted one new industry, Energy Resources Import-Export, which ships wood chips to Scandinavia.

"But we now have other, bigger industrial prospects, including a boat manufacturer, and a tugboat facility. That's just the beginning. We began to see that this little slit wasn't big enough to accommodate. So we went back to Mr. Chandler's idea. He and I negotiated for three months and purchased 523 acres of property for \$600,000—and with bigger firms interested in locating if we had the property and could develop a port, Mayor Hook and the council had what they needed to get support for the expenditure. The private businessman agreed to be given a facility within the larger port.

"Next, we went to Congressman Bevill, and told him we had prospects for real development if we could find the funds to develop a port, but we had to move rapidly. Bevill had co-sponsored the legislation creating the Appalachian Regional Commission. Aliceville is at the very bottom of what is defined as Appalachia, and so, with his help, we got the ARC to tag \$2.5 million onto their 1983 appropriations to build a port in Aliceville—the largest single appropriation they'd ever done.

"The original Tenn-Tom proposals included recreational areas, camp grounds, and boat launches. Congress cut these in 1982. I talked to Bevill's office, and they sent me to Senator Stennis. Mayor Hook and I met with him and went over what it would mean. We hadn't yet thought of the port, so getting a recreational area in Aliceville seemed the more important. At the time, Congress was about to pass an emergency jobs bill. That's how we got \$2 million for a recreational park.

"Now, we're trying to buy more property, and have a \$3 million application in with the Economic Development Administration. We have also filed for another \$1.3 million with ARC, for water and sewage system development for industrial sitings."

Who might want to locate in Aliceville at this point? "Anybody who wants to produce anything and ship it anywhere," Mayor Hook replies. "The water now goes all the way up to Chicago. And in the other direction, down through Mobile to anywhere in the world. Aliceville is going to be on the map."