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## "All a Mistake/ But Engineers Correct Creation"

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Tenn.-Tom.  
\* (sarcritical tone!)

(Excellent!) CA,  
Aug. 1, 1980

# All A Mistake/

## But Engineers Correct Creation

By MARVIN BAILEY

MOST of us are content just to sit back and marvel that the good Lord did such a fine job in creating our little portion of the world. Oh, sure, we all notice some minor defects here and there, like rivers that refuse to run in straight lines, but we've never been willing to believe that our land had any major flaws.

Fortunately for us, though, Congress had the foresight, way back when, to create the U.S. Engineers which, as we all know, has been improving nature for years by smoothing out those minor defects.

MANY OF US KNOW, too, that some years ago the Engineers discovered a major flaw in the continent. The Mississippi River was all wrong. Instead of flowing out west where the Department of Energy needs water to convert coal to oil, the thing runs smack through what ought to be soybean fields in the heartland of America.

Well, since the '70s the Engineers has been trying to correct that flaw by building a new improved drainage system that will carry the Tennessee River through Mississippi and Alabama into the Gulf of Mexico. Later, no doubt, the Mississippi can be diverted to where it should have been all along.

The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway is quite a project: 232 miles long and either 170 or 300 feet wide, depending on whether you are looking at calculations of the project's costs or benefits. And it comes with no less than 17 locks and dams which, expensive though they may be, are necessary to correct the present drainage of the basin.

In the process of correcting the Mississippi flaw, the corps will improve the last unchannelized river in the Mobile Basin by obliterating it. It will likewise improve 40,000 acres of bottomland forests and some 20,000 acres of prime farmland. And all that dredging and digging and widening will produce no less than 168 million cubic yards of good old American dirt — enough for the Engineers to fill 51 valleys in the basin.

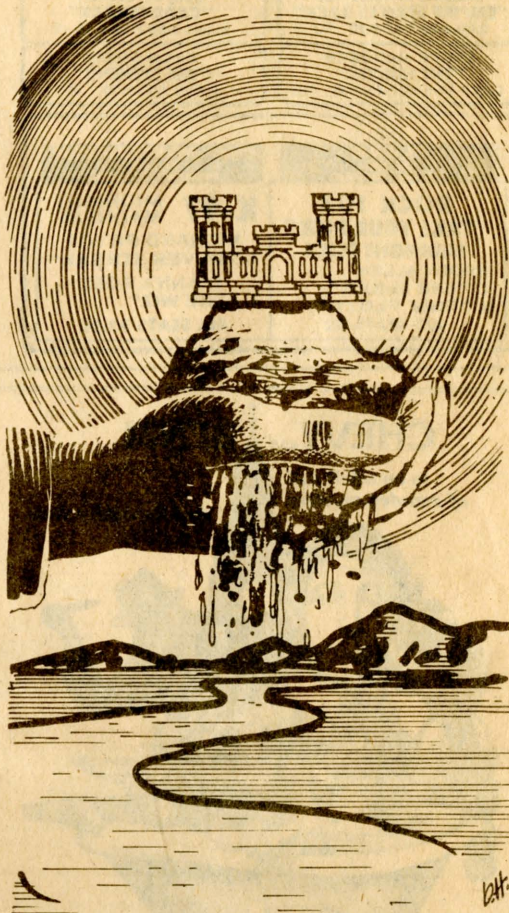
The project had been around a long time before it received its first funding by President Richard Nixon in 1971. Nixon, it should be remembered, bolstered a nation's sagging spirits in the late '60s by asking in a speech in Portland, Ore., "If you think America has been standing still, then who do you think built the biggest shopping center in the world?" Nixon knew it was not the kind of challenge the Engineers were likely to ignore.

Today the Engineers work around the clock to complete the TTW and thus set right the Maker's goof. The trouble is that of late those environmentalists — a notorious bunch collectively baptized in vinegar and raised on dill pickles — have been attacking the project. They point to audit reports by the GAO and the Army Audit Agency which detail massive cost overruns and deceptive benefit calculations and attempt to use that information to get Congress to stop the Engineers from correcting the Mississippi mistake. Congress so far has resisted such efforts.

It is true that TTW benefits will come largely from barge traffic that has been erroneously traveling the Mississippi for years. And it does seem that the Engineers based the project benefits on the assumption that all barge traffic on the TTW would be eight-barge tows. But that was only until it discovered that the project, already under construction, was too narrow to handle eight-barge tows.

The mistake was corrected by a slight modification to the plans. It cost \$500 million, but what's that to the Engineers? To their credit, they have managed to modify what was once only a \$120 million project into one that will now cost more than \$3 billion. In doing so, the Engineers have managed to do what no one else has been able to do — find enough economic benefits to make the project feasible.

Of course, to do so, they have had to ignore the coal industry, which claims that the 65 per cent of total TTW



benefits which are dependent on coal shipments are "impossible" because not that much coal exists in the upper Tennessee region. Such details should not faze an outfit that can calculate millions in benefits from tows running around the clock on a canal too narrow to hold them.

The Engineers also had to ignore claims by area industry that it was already well-served by an existing rail and barge service that includes the aforementioned misplaced, meandering river.

The Engineers point proudly to the project's benefits, which it figures by taking the difference between the rates charged by the area railroads and the rates to be charged by the waterway. Then by allowing taxpayers to pay the \$6 million annual operating costs of the TTW, the Engineers will not have to charge users every time a barge moves through the canal. Innovative calculations like that produce lots of benefits, not the least of which is that it could bankrupt area railroads and that in turn would allow taxpayers later to further subsidize the rails.

THE BENEFITS THAT will derive from public money being siphoned off as profits to canal users simply cannot be ignored. But great as those benefits are, they pale beside the symbolic value of the TTW. Think of it. Four, eight, even twenty years from now, a presidential candidate (maybe even Tennessee's own Howard Baker or Jim Sasser, both strong supporters of TTW) will bolster the sagging spirits of the nation by standing on the muddy and barren banks of the TTW and asking, "If you think American has been standing still, then who do you think built the biggest ditch in the world?"

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