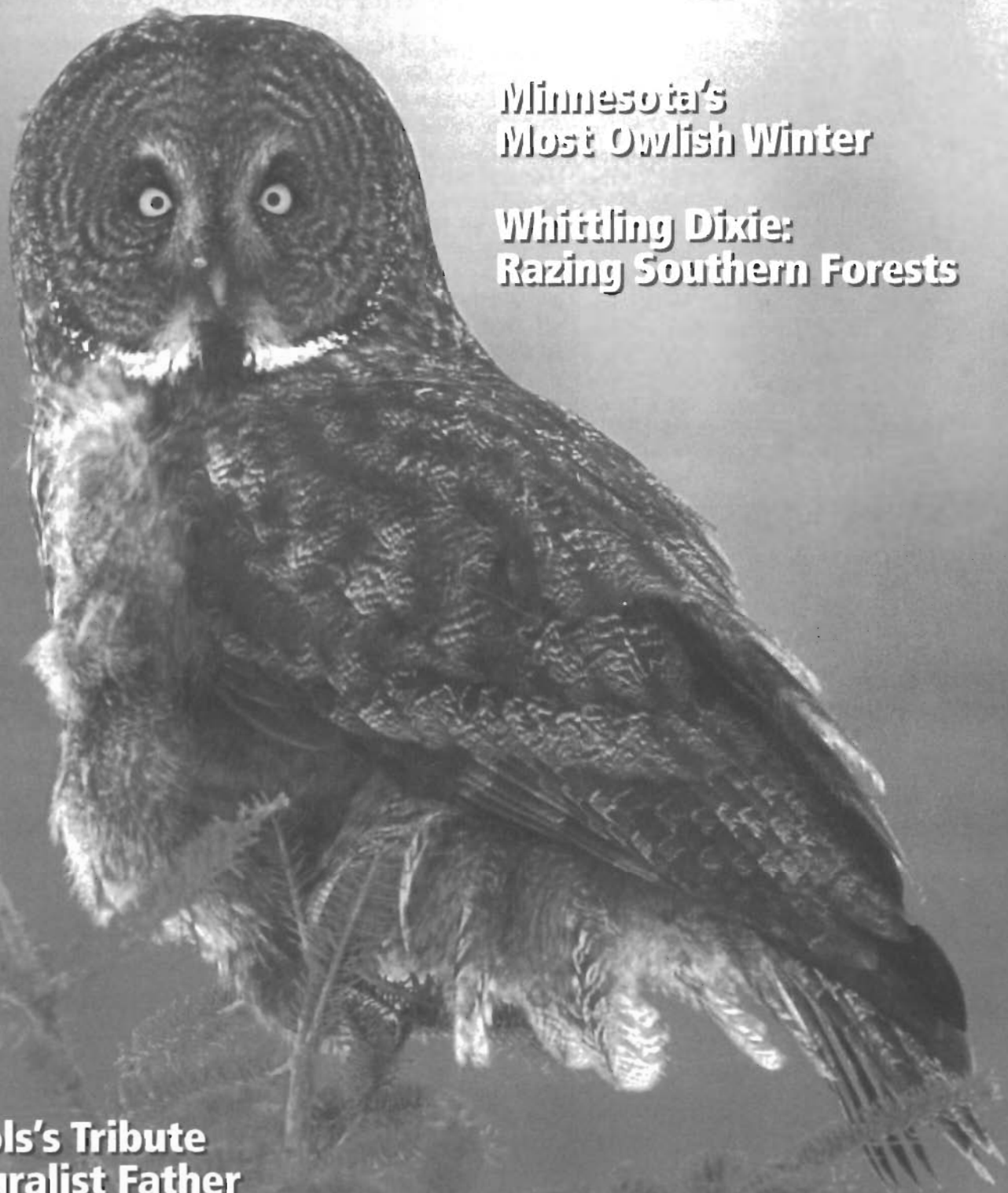


WESTON KOSOVA ON OIL'S NEW ALASKAN FRONTIER November-December 1997

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**Minnesota's
Most Owl-ish Winter**

**Whittling Dixie:
Razing Southern Forests**

**John Nichols's Tribute
to His Naturalist Father**

**Doug Peacock on
Bringing Back Grizzlies**

Fading Promise

Thirty years ago, 900 families were driven from the Land Between the Lakes. They haven't gone far—and they haven't forgotten. **BY JOHN DANIEL**

As we drive south through the Land Between the Lakes, pink-purple boughs of redbud haze the leafless forest, a beauty almost unbelievable to my western eyes. Spring is breaking on the 40-mile-long peninsula—a finger of land lying between two linear reservoirs, crossing the state line between western Kentucky and Tennessee. But if the redbuds are beautiful, it's the daffodils, clumped here and there in roadside meadows, that tell the tale. Their domestic charms seem out of place in this national recreation area with no permanent inhabitants. David Nickell stops the car by a meadow.

"The house sat here," he says, gesturing toward a vague depression in the grassy earth, daffodils grouped around it. "Over there was the cistern. The Snipes family lived up that hill—we used to walk up and visit."

Five generations and more than 200

years ago, Jeremiah Nickell arrived here to occupy his Revolutionary War land grant in what was then the western extremity of the infant United States. Others came, homes and churches were built, and over the decades a small farm culture evolved in relative isolation Between the Rivers (the Tennessee and the Cumberland), as the area came to be known. Some 200 small graveyards now dot the landscape.

It isn't easy for David Nickell, 40, to revisit the land he was forced to leave as a young boy. As we drive past a field lined with last year's cornstalks, he says, "That hurts more than anything. Somebody's farming my farm."

That somebody works under contract with the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federal corporation formed during the New Deal to revitalize the Tennessee River basin by producing hydroelectric power and developing natural resources. In the late 1950s,

with the Tennessee River dammed and a dam going in on the Cumberland, the TVA had the idea of turning the 170,000 acres of what would eventually be called the Land Between the Lakes (LBL) into a "green magnet"—a major recreation area that would serve the South and Midwest and stimulate the economy of its immediate surroundings. There were to be no private businesses within the LBL itself to compete with the marinas, tackle shops, restaurants, and resorts that planners envisioned on the outer shores of the two lakes.

The idea interested President John F. Kennedy and his Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall. But creation of a national recreation area normally requires legislation from Congress, which for political reasons was unlikely in this case. Designating the TVA to manage the park was the perfect solution: No act of Congress was necessary,



and the TVA had already been vested with the power of eminent domain for the purpose of demonstrating conservation practices. The agency would acquire the land, demonstrate its viability as a recreational attraction and an environmental-education site, and then hand the park off to a more appropriate federal agency a decade or so later.

Few of the 900 families living in the area were willing sellers, but protest was futile. Those who appealed for a higher price had the price slashed instead. The offered sum covered land only—residents who wouldn't or couldn't have their houses and churches moved saw them bulldozed and burned, in some cases with possessions still inside.

History is a form of storytelling, and two very different stories are told about the depopulation of the Land Between the Lakes, which took place from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. In the TVA's version, the inbred residents had been living in rural slums in a degraded landscape, without essential services, supporting themselves by making moonshine. During my visit last March the LBL visitors' center hosted an elaborate historical display on bootlegging, portraying it as the desperate act of people who had exhausted their resources. The implication was clear: The TVA had done the locals a favor by purchasing their worn-out land.

David Nickell cheerfully acknowledges the moonshining. During Prohibition, he tells me, an excellent grade of whiskey left Golden Pond in tank trucks, bound for Al Capone's Chicago. But he and other former residents bristle at the notion that life between the rivers was desperate. "Our communities came through the Depression better than most," he says, "because they were growing their own food. People took care of each other." Nickell's grandfather, a naturalist as well as a farmer, was known for nurturing quail and wild turkey populations, and he instructed his grandchildren—who he assumed would work the family farm—that woods and fields must be cared for in ways that increased their fertility.

"We were developing an almost native sense of ourselves," says Nickell, who now farms outside the area and teaches at a community college. "Six generations are enough to show the effects of what you've done. You evolve an understanding of how to take care of a place. That's what they took from us."

In return, along with very modest checks, the dispossessed residents received what they took to be a solemn promise: Their sacrifice was making possible a generous green gift to the American people, and that gift would remain forever uncommercialized.

Three decades later, the handoff to

another agency has yet to materialize, and the Tennessee Valley Authority's management of the Land Between the Lakes has become so controversial that a congressional hearing on the peninsula's future was held last June at Murray State University, in western Kentucky. As protesters outside the building warned that the United Nations was trying to seize control of the Land Between the Lakes, clear-minded citizens with very real concerns filed through a metal detector and entered the hearing room.

Lyon County Judge-Executive Terry McKinney testified that the three counties from which the LBL was created had been "drastically affected," each losing some 40 percent of its land mass and a substantial portion of its population. "No one group of people has paid a greater price in the name of TVA than those forced to move from Between the Rivers," he said. But the most powerful testimony came from former residents. Her voice choked with emotion, Ella Mae Travis, whose late father-in-law owned a marina and more than 500 acres in the LBL, told the committee, "I sincerely feel that the former landowners' constitutional rights were violated from the cradle to the grave, and all done by TVA with no apology... TVA acts like they own the LBL, [but] the American taxpayers own

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GENE BOAZ



1. A view of the Land Between the Lakes, on the Kentucky-Tennessee line. 2. The LBL's elusive elk. 3. A Louisiana waterthrush. 4. One of the last houses in the LBL. 5. A blue jay. 6. David Nickell (with daughter Tess) and other members of Concept Zero, on an active LBL farm. 7. A tobacco barn. 8. Telltale daffodils. 9. Clearing the Elk and Bison Prairie.

LBL. Let us not forget this fact.”

Travis and other critics—environmentalists, educators, and businesspeople alike—cited a history of commercial development within the area that directly contravened the promise on which the park was founded, as well as its mission of conservation and environmental education. Many of them called for the TVA's immediate removal as steward of the park. For his part, David Nickell suggested that in all fairness the agency should be given the same choice the residents had enjoyed: haul out its buildings and possessions or have them bulldozed and burned.

At the very least, the June hearing is expected to lead to a congressional decision about what kind of development and how much—if any—should be permitted in the area. But it is also possible that the TVA's days of stewardship are now numbered, that before long, management of the LBL may be transferred to another federal agency, maybe even the National Park Service.

The history of the TVA's involvement in the Land Between the Lakes boils down to a narrative of money. As a federal agency whose primary business is the for-profit generation of electricity, the TVA was from the beginning a strange choice to serve as caretaker of a national recreation area. And by the mid-1980s, the agency's financial status had grown problematic as well: After a largely failed attempt to convert part of its operation to nuclear power, the TVA found itself \$28 billion in debt. Moreover, the federal subsidy it receives for its “nonpower programs”—such as the administration of the LBL—was shrinking.

In those straitened financial circumstances, and looking to make its LBL operations more self-sufficient, the TVA began to succumb to the temptations of the marketplace: In 1987 it began commercializing the park, introducing ice and firewood sales, convenience stores, and equipment-rental outlets; then came gift shops, followed by higher campground rates and long-term leases on some campsites. Many national parks and recreation areas provide some of these services, but none of them has the unique history of the Land Between the Lakes. Sporadic

protests arose not only from former residents but also from business owners outside the park, who didn't appreciate government-subsidized competition.

Those protests flared into a firestorm in December 1995, when the TVA unveiled its planning models for the LBL's future, called the Five Concepts. The most extravagant of the proposals envisioned two hotel resorts, a conference center, two campground resorts with beach parks and marinas, a starlight theater, and a heritage theme park. Ed Whitfield, the Republican congressman whose district includes most of the LBL and its surroundings, came to a meeting with a brochure showing a tasteful hotel in a national park. He asked the crowd, “Wouldn't you like something like this at Land Between the Lakes?” His ears are still ringing with the answer. The congressman has since become a critic of LBL commercialization.

Opposition to the Five Concepts was so vehement that the TVA withdrew them before the public comment period was up, admitting only that it had tried to do “too much, too fast” and citing diminished federal funding and its own consumer research as justification for its push to commercialize the park. “Congress has told us to recover more of our costs,” says Kathy Harper, the agency's information officer for the LBL. “To do that we've got to offer what customers want.”

What Harper doesn't say is that while TVA *has* been instructed to make the LBL more self-sufficient, it has been told to do so by downsizing its staff—not by privatizing and generating more revenue. Nor does she mention that her “customers” were polled throughout a 400-mile radius, giving, as one local reporter explains, “equal or more weight to comments from people who knew nothing of the early promises to landowners, in order to find people who support the action [the TVA] wants to take. . . . In its surveys [about the Five Concepts], TVA asked respondents to indicate which concept they preferred, but left no place to

indicate ‘none of the above.’” Harper also seems to dismiss the message of a petition delivered last year, signed by 15,000 local residents, protesting further development within the LBL.

Nevertheless, commercialization has continued since the Five Concepts were scrapped. There are now seven gift shops in the recreation area, a pay-to-drive-through Elk and Bison Prairie (where no one I spoke with had seen an elk), and nine-month leases, costing as much as \$1,600, at campsites that used to be open to all. Wranglers Campground, the park's equestrian center, has become particularly contentious; despite a petition from longtime users who liked the camp as it was, the TVA has built cabins and a restaurant there.

Meanwhile, the TVA has been stripping educational programs and facilities. Empire Farm, where visitors could observe demonstrations of organic farming, beekeeping, and solar technology, closed in 1991, followed three years later by the Youth Station, which for 27 years had been a much-loved fixture of local environmental-education programs. Joe Baust, the director of Murray State's Center for Environmental Education, testified at the June hearing about his efforts to salvage the station by getting backing from school districts, corporations, and individuals who recognized its value to their communities. Despite a tide of public support, Baust was rebuffed with a polite no.

“So now it's a ghost town,” he said at the hearing. Congressman Whitfield called it “shocking and shameful” that the Youth Station was “rotting away.”

All the more shocking, it might be argued, given the TVA's apparent profligacy in everything *but* its support for education and conservation. The House Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development chided the TVA in 1996 for spending money on unauthorized capital improvements and ignoring “the paramount importance that area residents place on maintaining the park in its natural conditions.”

The subcommittee observed pointedly that the LBL workforce is about three times larger, on average, than

Commercial development has continued in the area, even as the TVA has stripped educational programs and facilities.

the staff the National Park Service employs to manage a similar acreage. "An army of employees is not necessary for the maintenance of the park in its wild and natural state," the subcommittee went on, concluding its statement thus: "In light of its poor management and budget practices with respect to LBL, TVA can expect continued close scrutiny of its future operations and budget requirements."

And indeed, last August, Congressman Zack Wamp (R-TN) called for a review of the agency's spending and management practices. Among his concerns: TVA-sponsored receptions on a Tennessee River party barge, a fleet of airplanes, a pending lease on a corporate jet, Christmas bonuses and benefits for executives that often run to the tens of thousands of dollars (and which Wamp called "offensive"), a \$20 million advertising campaign over three years promoting the TVA, and lucrative consulting contracts for friends and associates of TVA executives.

Critics of the agency point out that the LBL, until recent years, had a staff of dedicated scientists and educators. Most have been reassigned or paid to retire, while the marketing staff has grown. When I asked Kathy Harper how many of the LBL's 114 full-time employees work in environmental education, she answered quickly, "All of us do." Her remark echoes the cheery claim in a park brochure that "Every day is Earth Day at LBL!"

Nice thoughts, but unconvincing. Some environmental programs are offered at Brandon Springs Group Camp and the Nature Station, but they seem pretty perfunctory. The Nature Station, when I stopped in, had knickknacks for sale, an exhibit telling how the TVA had rescued overused farmland, and a few poisonous snakes in terrariums. In a small zoo out back, a captive bald eagle stretched its wings, several deer gazed back at their viewers, and one red wolf neurotically paced a well-worn path along the base of its enclosure. If environmental education was the purpose, it wasn't at all clear what was being taught.

The TVA has the best timber-management plan in the region," says Jim Atchison. "On paper." Atchison and other lo-

cal activists are showing me what LBL logging looks like on the ground. At this site, Work Area 35, near Wranglers Campground, two skid roads of limestone gravel run straight down a moderate slope to a streambed winding through the hardwood forest. Erosion barriers built into the roads have washed out in recent rainstorms, and the logged areas show no evidence of having been reseeded. The cutting was selective—selecting the biggest trees, 70- and 80-year-old oaks and hickories. Some stumps are within 10 feet of the streambed. The scene does not entirely support Kathy Harper's assurances that "sites are restored to a point you hardly know they've been logged."

To be honest, compared with the conifer killing fields of my home state, Oregon, this site is small and tidy. The forest of the Land Between the Lakes is not being laid waste, which is fortunate, since it is in the process of recovering from just that: From 1829 into the early 1900s, iron was smelted here in giant furnaces that each consumed 500 acres of woods a year. There is no old growth in the Land Between the Lakes; its gentle hills and draws are healing over with an adolescent forest.

The TVA has sold timber here since the beginning of its tenure, despite the promise of no commercial activity. (I was told that the timber revenue—about \$573,000 net last year, or nearly 10 percent of the national recreation area's total budget of \$6 million—is only an incidental "byproduct" of the forest-management program.) Early this year the agency announced a 40 percent increase in timber sales, pointing out, no doubt accurately, that the land supports a greater timber volume now than before the TVA took over. The quality of the forest is a different question, though, given the evident tendency to sell the biggest trees and to break up the forest with cuts of varying degrees of severity.

According to the TVA, these clearings are made to improve forest health and to provide what is known as edge habitat for deer and other wildlife. Unfortunately, edge habitat is not scarce in the region; edge habitat is what the region has become. The national forestlands near the Land Between the Lakes are riddled with private inholdings and timber clearcuts.

That's good news for deer (and deer hunters) but terrible news for certain songbirds and other creatures that need a continuous closed-canopy forest.

In 1991 the Land Between the Lakes and its 17 surrounding counties were designated a biosphere reserve under the Man and the Biosphere Program, an international conservation program begun in 1970 by the United Nations. A biosphere reserve comprises an undisturbed core area surrounded by a buffer zone of managed use, which phases outward into farms, towns, and cities. The TVA has proposed a 42,500-acre core—only one-fourth of the peninsula—chopped into more than 100 pieces. One could argue that a core of fragments misses the point of a biosphere reserve, and that the TVA's management plan does too. It stipulates that "vegetative management techniques may be used in the core areas—prescribed burns, TSI, and pesticides." TSI stands for Timber Stand Improvement, which usually involves chainsaws.

Paul Yambert, a professor emeritus of forestry at Southern Illinois University, thinks it's a fair question whether trees should be cut at all in the Land Between the Lakes. "Their forestry isn't all that bad," he allows, "but there's no multiple-use mandate in their mission, and there's supposed to be no commercial activity. I'd like to know, Who's going to maintain unfragmented forest in this region?"

The Land Between the Lakes may look small on a map compared with many national forests, but in fact its 170,000 acres host the largest publicly owned block of contiguous hardwood forest still standing between the Smoky Mountains and the Rockies. If the LBL were allowed to achieve its potential, it could become a heartland of old-growth hardwood, a forest such as Daniel Boone walked in. That would be over the next 10 years as the crises in Social Security and Medicare take hold." The question then becomes, Who will step in and fulfill the original promise made to the people Between the Rivers more than 30 years ago? Will Congress provide the funding required to preserve the Land Between the Lakes as it is, or will it simply let private commercial interests fill the vacuum left by the TVA?

The members of Concept Zero and

others who are fighting to restore the LBL's original mission are heartened that Congressman Whitfield may be ready to force the long-overdue hand-off to another federal entity. Representatives of the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers all made presentations at the hearing of their respective management philosophies and capabilities. "Given recent developments," said Whitfield, "I think we need to look at other agencies."

Concept Zero takes no official position on who the steward should be, but it's clear that most members favor the Park Service. Says Yambert, "They're the ones best equipped to restore the original mission, a green peninsula supporting businesses outside. They could best fulfill the promise of the biosphere reserve."

But the political realities leave many area residents unconvinced that the handoff will occur at all. If it does occur, they say, the Forest Service is likely to be the recipient. Politically that move would be easiest, because it would least disrupt the present arrangement. The doctrine of multiple use would continue to prevail, with timber sales proceeding. The present LBL staff members may have reason to hope that they would stay on, to manage recreation under a new bureaucratic boss.

It is decision time for the Land Between the Lakes, a time of both peril and possibility. I wondered, as I was leaving, if former residents had hopes of returning to their ancestral places. I asked David Nickell. He paused a long time before he spoke: "It's something you can't give up, emotionally, but my kids have a home. I wouldn't do to them what was done to me. This land is what's important now. If the promise is kept, most of us will be content." 🐾