

Land Between the Lakes:  
A Story of Colonialism in Kentucky  
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In far western Kentucky and Tennessee the northward flowing Cumberland and Tennessee rivers and the Ohio River, into which they empty, form an inland peninsula. Revolutionary War veterans who were given land as payment for their service settled this peninsula in the 1780s. At that time this was the far western edge of the nation they had helped establish. Because the primary access to the peninsula was by ferry, these families had minimal interaction with outsiders for six or more generations. A unique culture emerged over that time period.

In the late 1940s Kentucky Dam was constructed on the Tennessee River, forming Kentucky Lake. In the early 1960s Barkley Dam was constructed on the Cumberland River, forming Barkley Lake. These two projects permanently flooded the best cropland on the peninsula and involved three rounds of eminent domain, disrupting well-established patterns of family and agriculture. As the water for Barkley Lake was completing its rise, word came that the federal government had decided to remove the more than 900 families that remained Between the Rivers in order to convert their land into a National Recreation Area to be known as "Land Between the Lakes" (LBL). Official accounts focus on the benefits that came from the project. The costs to those whose way of life stood in the path of "progress" are seldom acknowledged. The following is a personal account of growing up during the forced removal of the people, and the current attempt to salvage the remnants of that culture.

Children tend to accept whatever setting they are raised in as normal. It was only later in my life that I learned it was unusual to be raised on a sixth generation farm in a community populated by sixth, and even seventh, generation neighbors. I had always known that we were somehow "different" from the "outsiders" on the other sides of the rivers; they weren't really trusted as were people from Between the Rivers. My father was killed in a farming accident when I was very young. It was common practice for the neighbors to come in to dig the grave and help the family get through. The body was laid out in our living room, and the house was full of people. I don't remember much more of that. My grandfathers continued to teach my brothers and me about conservation, for we would need to know what he had learned and add to it from our own experiences. He would recite poetry to us, often his own. He would tell us the family stories. He would expound on the history of the farm and how we should improve it for our children and grandchildren. We heard it all many times. We were never told, and didn't need to be told, that the farm was our "place." It was the family's--past, present, and future generations. No one ever had to tell us that the farm was not a commodity. That was the assumption that drove what needed to be spoken. The very phrase, "our farm," (or more commonly, "our place") was inclusive.

It was also unspoken, but clearly understood, that the commonly heard phrase, "Between the Rivers" was inclusive, encompassing not merely our family and farm but the neighbors and their

places. Our place was an integral part of Between the Rivers. The people Between the Rivers had managed to live in relative independence of outside influence for the entire history of this nation. Between the Rivers was our home--where outsiders might visit, but where we belonged.

Every farm had a good size garden and we supplemented that with game from the forest and fish from the rivers that surrounded us. I still have the "Steven's Little Scout"--a single shot .22 rifle about the size of a B.B. gun--that had belonged to my father. My older brothers had used it before it passed to me. Like most every male Between the Rivers, by the time I was in the second or third grade I was already squirrel and rabbit hunting to supplement the dinner table. Though we enjoyed being in the woods we saw the hunting as helping out, not as recreation. Going to the woods was much like going to the garden; it was purposive, deliberate, and yielded rewards relative to the care that had been invested. Much of my grandfather's teachings had involved managing the forest to yield wildlife--both game and non-game. I don't remember a time when adults were not gathering to discuss, with hushed and serious voices, what the government was up to. Kentucky Dam and Lake were completed before my birth. Barkley Dam was nearing completion, and the water would soon be rising to cover the homes and land of many families on the Cumberland River side of the peninsula. Most everyone had already moved from the condemned land. I remember neighbors hurrying in with the excited news that Babe Williams had blown the windshield out of a government truck with her old shotgun. Miss Babe, in her '60s by that time, had never married and ran her family farm by herself, raising a few cows, hens, and her prized turkeys. She had sworn she would not leave her home. It, like most of our farms, had been in the family for generations and she could not comprehend being anywhere else. The government men were approaching her two-story frame house to present her with the condemnation papers. She told them to get back in their truck but they ignored her. One barrel, the story went, took out the windshield; the second barrel offered enough reason for the government men to scramble to their truck and head back towards wherever it is government men come from. I soaked up the story in wide-eyed amazement, trying to picture the whole scene. This would have been about the time I began first grade, but it made a lasting impression on me. The adults seemed to express a mixture of sympathy and concern. "What will they do to her now?" "She shouldn't have done that." "What choice did she have?"

About a month or so later the news arrived via excited neighbors: They burned Babe's house! Government men had persuaded her to come in for a meeting. They convinced a local man whom she knew and trusted to take her to the meeting, for Miss Babe never did own a vehicle. The man later swore he believed the meeting was legitimate. When they discovered there was to be no meeting they headed back to Miss Babe's place. Rounding the curve at the top of the ridge they saw the smoke. According to the man doing the driving she slumped in her seat and hung her head, but said nothing. They had pushed her house into a pile with a bulldozer and set it afire--all her possessions still inside.

News of what they had done to Babe Williams was carried far and wide. News of such an event would have spread anyway, but there was a rumor circulating, that no one could verify, that the government was now planning to use eminent domain a fourth time to take everything remaining from the first three rounds. The thought that they might come for us all put the event in an alarming light. I remember hearing the story from the next room while I played. I remember the

heavy sinking feeling, not so much because I understood what it all meant, but more from the tone of the grownups. It was different now. Always before there had been at least a shadow of reason involving the dams and the rising water. Always before there had been an opening for us to gather into. They were only taking the edges that had to be taken. Now they might be after it all. Though I did not fully understand it, I could sense that the opening was closing in on us.

"There would be no reason to take any more," someone said. Someone else said they might not need much of a reason. "But surely they can't take everything from us without a reason." These statements weighed heavy on my young mind and, I would learn years later, on young minds all along the peninsula that were overhearing similar conversations in numerous living rooms and kitchens. Forces we could not comprehend, that our parents could neither explain nor protect us from, were moving across our land, taking from us at will, and now using force against even elderly ladies who dared to resist.

The rumors persisted but could not be verified. For a time things began to settle into a routine that a kid could live within. The changes still appeared relatively under control. The water from Barkley Lake was rising steadily, driving wildlife from the bottoms onto higher ground. I remember the dramatic increase in snakes, especially copperheads and water moccasins, it seemed. Bobcats were now seen in the barnyards in broad daylight, sometimes killing farm dogs that tried to put the cats back where they belonged. The result was my mother keeping a much tighter rein on me, but we still managed to live like we had a future extending coherently out of our past. It was, for a while, a strangely exciting time for a young boy. The Delta Queen, a paddle wheeled excursion boat up from New Orleans, would sometimes pull into the bay where Nickell Branch used to feed into the Cumberland River. The calliope music could be heard throughout the hills and hollows with the result that families would drop their chores, pile into automobiles, or head down through the woods on foot to the bay where the boat would be anchored. Before long a crowd would gather to take in the spectacle of the paddle wheeler, the lively music and the deck lined with wealthy tourists. People on the shore would take advantage of the impromptu gathering to visit, laugh and dance to the music. I don't know exactly when it dawned on me, but it finally did. The tourists on the big boat were lined up along the rail, taking pictures of us. The boat had not pulled into the bay for our amusement; the calliope had summoned us out of the forest for the amusement of the tourists. I don't believe I have danced since.

Tourists were also beginning to arrive on the peninsula itself, attracted by the two large lakes and the 70,000-acre refuge (started by Between the Rivers natives about 1908, originally without any government involvement). Bridges had been built along with the dams to allow easier access. With the tourists beginning to flow in, many families were opening businesses to accommodate them. Boat docks, hunting lodges, etc. began to appear. The talk was that although we had lost our best crop ground to the lakes, it appeared the summer influx of tourists would allow us to settle back into a decent life.

It was about this time that the announcement was made--not to us, but in the outside press. The Federal Government was going to take everything that remained on the peninsula. A National Recreation Area to be called Land Between the Lakes would be established to attract visitors for

outdoor recreation and environmental education. But LBL was to be unique in that it would economically benefit the surrounding region by the innovative plan of providing only the natural setting and the educational component. The private sector, on the opposite shores of the lakes, would be expected to provide all commercial facilities. Of course, in order to provide this benefit for everyone in the surrounding region the remaining families Between the Rivers would have to be removed, otherwise our homes, farms and emerging tourist facilities would destroy the natural setting that would be so attractive to the visitors. This would not be a problem, the press reported. The people Between the Rivers were so economically and culturally repressed they would benefit from being allowed to escape the peninsula where they had been trapped for so many generations. A barrage of articles on our depressed and backward lifestyle began to appear. What they saw as a way to benefit us, we saw as a frontal assault on our way of life and our very identities.

I attended many meetings during this time with my mother and new stepfather, who had already been forced to move three times by the government. The meetings were held at the little schools and churches throughout the peninsula as the people desperately looked for ways to stop this assault. When the government closed our schools the meetings began to be held in homes. It seemed to me that the meetings were always about the same. Someone would ask what we were going to do. Someone else would announce, "They can't do this." It was always reported that Congressman Stubblefield was telling those who contacted him for help that we should not worry because the government could not force anyone to sell who did not want to, not with a recreation area as the only justification. We learned later that Stubblefield was one of the main supporters of the project and was working on the plan to have us removed as quickly as possible.

The closing of the schools meant we had to board a bus and ride off the peninsula to the main county school more than an hour away. When the buses from Between the Rivers would arrive at the big school it was obvious from the reactions of the other kids that we were branded. We were commonly referred to as "trash from Between the Rivers." My brother even had a teacher use this epithet in class. Obviously we were too dumb to know what we really needed or else we would have been jumping at the chance to leave our homes. I had teachers tell the class that the people Between the Rivers were standing in the way of progress by resisting the project. The message was plain to me: the outsiders thought they were going to get rich from tourist dollars if we would just move. We were being sacrificed for the benefit of the people across the lakes. The government was going to take everything from us for the benefit of others. During the summer months that followed, things didn't get much better. Tourists would stop on the side of the road and take pictures of us while we played in our yard, pointing and shaking their heads at our supposed backward condition. We had not yet been relocated, but we had already been extracted from our insulated cultural environment and transformed into objects contrasted against the values and norms of a world I did not understand. We were obviously not part of their world and could no longer live authentically in our own. My aunt remarked that the government had said they were bringing progress but that the first change she saw was that we had to start putting locks on doors that had never needed locks before. We saw their progress as an imposed collapse; but our perspective was not going to be considered -- the government was here to help us.

I remember the feeling of utter despair--as much as my young mind could get around such feelings--as tourists and government employees would be found digging up the flowers in the yard or rummaging through the barn or the farm shop. The shop contained tools and implements from generations' worth of farming, which, we discovered, these outsiders saw as collectable antiques. When we protested we were told that all this was government property now, and we were going to move anyway. All this began before we were ever formally told about the planned recreation area.

The government did finally send a crew to conduct a "survey" of the families. They were instructed to explain to the people that the project was being done to ensure that LBL would remain, "forever free to the public and undeveloped commercially" [from an affidavit recently filed by one of the government's surveyors]. We were told that the removal of all "inholdings" was necessary to ensure the natural atmosphere necessary for the project to work.

Soon afterwards land surveyors began arriving. They did not inform us of where they would be working or of their purposes. They did not bother to drive to the end of fields to use the gates, but rather cut fences and drove through, releasing livestock into cornfields and forest. Numerous stories began to surface of surveyors driving through, rather than around, cornfields, and then blazing a different road through for the return trip, rather than the original track. After their dinner break they would make a new path through the crops. That they were destroying our livelihood didn't seem to matter to them.

The story was told of a surveyor seen crossing a fence with a line rod, which he proceeded to extend for the transit operator to sight in on. As the rod reached its maximum height the tip was clipped off by a gunshot from the ridge top. The surveyor re-crossed the fence and was seated in the truck before his partner realized what had happened. As I look back on it now, I am amazed how little of this behavior occurred--from our side. I recently told a TVA official that if we had really been like they had portrayed us there would have been dead government men all over those hills and hollows. I cannot say the government people were as constrained in their behavior towards us, though we usually received the bad end of the official accounts. For instance, an elderly neighbor left her shower one morning to find government employees in her house. Many families had heirloom furniture removed under the explanation that it was government property and should have already been moved if we wanted to keep it. This lady's response was to show the government men to the door with a shotgun. The official account was only of the dismayed TVA men being run off at gunpoint by one of the crazy natives. From their perspective, they were certainly working in difficult conditions.

The meetings continued, only more desperate than before. Letters were written to every politician any one could think of. I remember the sense of awe I felt at thinking President Kennedy would read the letter written at our kitchen table. By the time letters were written to President Johnson I already understood that no one was going to read them.

The forced removals for the LBL project began not long after I entered grade school. Rather than take whole communities at a time, individual families from various communities would be given notice, while the rest of the community was left to wonder when their time would come. The

effect, apparently by design, was to weaken the solidarity that might allow the resistance to grow. The pattern was always the same: a certified letter would arrive (the dreaded letter, spoken of and feared long before anyone we knew had actually seen one) informing the family what the land was worth (based, according to congressional records, on half the assessed tax rate as agricultural land) and a date by which you had to be gone. We were told we would be allowed to move our houses with us if we wanted. The "offered" price for the land was so low that it was difficult to buy land outside and build a house; so many people chose to move their houses. Unless you were lucky enough to find land outside the project area and still between the two rivers, which few were, this required loading the houses on a barge and floating them across the lakes. Finding available and affordable land outside was not easy in a market inflated by over 900 families scrambling for a place to go. If you were not gone by the specified date, federal marshals arrived to escort you from your home and inform you where to pick up your check--while a bulldozer pushed down the house, which was then burned and the remains buried. Any belongings still inside suffered the same fate as the house. There are still people who have never cashed their checks, refusing to accept the legitimacy of what was done. Babe Williams had been the foreshadowing of the nightmare that was descending on us.

An appeals board comprised of three TVA employees was established for anyone who wished to contest the offered price. Those who went before the board had their offered price lowered, usually by half. Word spread quickly and few went before that board. TVA touted the low numbers of appeals as proof that they were offering a fair price. But it was not price we most contested; rather it was the idea of being forced from our homes at all. The law did not allow us to take this challenge before a jury. Congressman Stubblefield, who had by now become appalled at the numerous stories of abuse and mistreatment he was hearing, assisted in getting the law changed so that eminent domain cases could be challenged before a legitimate jury. The law was changed, but because the LBL project was already in progress, it did not apply to us. A class action case did finally reach a judge in 1972. It was ruled that while eminent domain could not be used merely to establish a recreation area, LBL was a unique demonstration of how to economically benefit the surrounding region by limiting all commercial activity to the outside, thus the use of eminent domain was justified.

It seems that the last two or three years I lived Between the Rivers were dominated by stories flowing as strong and steady as the rivers that had surrounded us. I don't remember any happy stories from those times. The old folks seemed to be the ones who suffered most. A neighbor had been driving home from work when he saw an elderly man from the community being held back by federal marshals while the bulldozer approached his house. Stopping to see what could be done, he talked the marshals into letting him carry a few pieces of furniture out for the old man. They wouldn't wait long, for they had to get the dozer down the road to another house. After carrying out as much as he could he asked the gentleman if he had made arrangements for some place to go. The man replied he had not, for "where are you going to go when you're already home."

It was not uncommon for the elderly to suffer breakdowns and even heart attacks as their deadline approached. Our nearest neighbor had sworn he would never leave. True to his word, he died in his yard shortly before his deadline arrived. His family decided not to resist further

and had begun moving. They returned to take out another load of belongings with the deadline still a week or more away and discovered that the bulldozer had come and demolished the house along with all that remained inside. It seems the truck hauling the dozer was in the area and it didn't make sense to have to make another trip later on the designated date. The family was told that nothing they had was worth moving anyway. From the official perspective, the removal of the people had already taken several years longer than planned and they were merely trying to be efficient.

In the midst of all the chaos, we had precious few victories. One of the few was the concession to allow us to continue to use our cemeteries as long as the families maintained them; otherwise they would be allowed to disappear into the forest and we would lose all claim to them. We had petitioned to allow the many small churches in the area to stay. The members of the various communities could then return on Sundays to preserve their deep community ties. We were told the churches would be treated the same as the houses and barns. We could either move them or they would be bulldozed and burned. Most were destroyed, as there wasn't time to make proper arrangements for one's own family, much less for a community to come together to relocate a church. Stories are still told of the last services at the churches and the unwillingness to bring the meetings to a close. Some churches held symbolic funerals, burying a box filled with items members placed inside to reflect their relation to the church and community.

I spent many summer days on the porch of our house watching the neighbors' houses go down the road. It was an interesting, albeit morbid, game guessing whether they had found a place inside the rivers, or would they be heading to the ferry site. My family was forced out shortly before my ninth birthday. Those last months are hard for me to remember now. We always had to leave somebody home to guard against the looters that became increasingly common. Outsiders in trucks were viewed with extreme suspicion. I even heard of a family that moved their belongings and returned several days later when the house mover was scheduled to arrive, only to discover that someone had stolen the hardwood floors. The "authorities" were not seen as protection, but as allies of those who were, as one woman put, "running us off like dogs." The day we left for good I hid in my empty bedroom closet, hoping it would all just go away and somehow wouldn't be true. This was my stepfather's fourth forced move; he understood the magnitude of the force that was aligned against us. I can still see his expressionless face as we drove away.

Arriving at our new location we began the new adventure of discovering life in a small subdivision after generations on a farm surrounded by forests, rivers, and the wildlife they contained. I learned fairly quickly that many of the new neighbors were also refugees of the LBL project. It never occurred to me to question why there remained a bond with anyone who was from Between the Rivers. I often met people I had never seen, but learned quickly "they're from Between the Rivers." It didn't matter that they were from a community miles away from where we had lived, we were bonded. We stuck together in school and after we graduated. Now, in middle age, I am still struck by the gut-level reaction to learning someone is from Between the Rivers. A remnant of that old opening is revealed through which we recognize each other in a common heritage, as if we had just discovered we were cousins.

When I was ten, relatives from out of state came to visit. I was informed that we were "going

over home" to let them see what the place looked like now. For the first time we went to the visitors information center at LBL. There was a prominent display there representing the "twixt the rivers culture." I had never heard anyone use the term "twixt" before. The display consisted solely of a moonshine still and a picture of someone sitting in a corncrib husking corn. We were then directed into an auditorium for the interpretive film on the formation of LBL. The room full of tourists gasped as the desperate condition of the backward people living in the area was depicted. The house they showed as "typical" of the dwellings of these pitiful people was, according to my mother, somebody's henhouse. The film told of how grateful the people were to be released from their Appalachian-like poverty and failed culture. I left the building in tears.

When it came time for my high school to send us to LBL on a fieldtrip, as part of the environmental education program I refused to attend. I learned later that many of us from Between the Rivers had refused to go. The memories of what had been done there continued to haunt me. The few times I tried to tell others about what had been done, they would not believe such things could really happen--not in America. I did not return until I was home from my sophomore year of college and was talked in to attending the annual reunion. Most of the communities, and many of the churches, were holding reunions by that time. I was surprised to discover that I was having a good time, at first. The music, the food and the familiar people set an enjoyable atmosphere. Soon, however, people began breaking off in clusters and sharing stories. It was not long before I was surrounded by groups of adults sobbing quietly. With an unbearable lump in my throat, and a swelling bitterness I did not understand, I got in my car and left and did not return for many more years. I understand the emotion behind those individuals (I know some and have heard of others) who feel shame and embarrassment at being from Between the Rivers. I understand it, but I count it as one of the worst offenses the government did to us.

While in a doctoral program in philosophy at the University of Colorado, I became involved in the Big Mountain Defense Fund, which was working with Hopi and Navajo resisting forced relocation for the sake of a Peabody Coal strip mine. Listening to these people speak about the importance of their place, and how their identity was tied to that place, something clicked. About that time I received word that my maternal grandparent's farm, outside LBL, but only 20 minutes from our old home site, was likely to be subdivided unless someone in the family wanted it. Though my course work was completed and I had gone through the exams, I dropped out of the program without writing a dissertation; and my wife and I moved back to Kentucky. I had a connection to place that few today can even comprehend--much less experience first hand. I had to do what was necessary to preserve it.

I painted houses, worked for a large animal veterinarian, began raising and training draft horses, and anything else to get by. About the time our children were born, I got on as adjunct faculty at the community college in Paducah. I began taking night classes in the sociology graduate program at Southern Illinois University, an hour away. The responsibility of caring for the family cemetery Between the Rivers fell to me, and I began to get reacquainted with the place that had always been a defining part of my identity, no matter how hard I had tried to put it behind me. I began to make peace with what had happened and to think about what I should teach my children about their connection to Between the Rivers.

It was in December of 1995 that TVA released its plan to commercially develop the LBL: golf courses, lake front condominiums, and a "heritage theme park" were proposed. I had thought there was nothing left they could take from us. But now the very reason it had all happened--the logos, the gnomonic component of it all--was being taken away. To add commercial developments when our forced removal was justified solely on the basis of eliminating all commercial activity from the peninsula was an outrage. To propose using our culture for one of these developments was unthinkable. I soon discovered I was not the only one upset. The people came together once again to resist what we saw as an affront to something very important to our sense of who we are. We signed petitions, called politicians, held press conferences, and anything else we could do to stop this final attack on the tenuous connection we had left.

We claimed the heritage belonged to us and that the government did not have the right to use it. We insisted the promise of no commercial development be honored. TVA officials told us that we have no standing with regard to what takes place at LBL. The resource manager told me I had no more claim to our family cemetery than any other citizen. "You were paid for your property," he said. We were told that the promise made in exchange for the taking of our homes, farms and heritage was no longer valid. Due to the intense outcry over the proposals, a congressional hearing was held on the fate of LBL. I testified at that hearing that we still have a cultural connection to our place that we intend to maintain and that we should have standing with regard to what happens to places and things significant to our cultural identity. I asked the congressional members in attendance, "How many generations do a people have to live in one place before they are native to that place?" No answer was ever given.

In October of 1999 the LBL was transferred away from TVA to the Forest Service. We still have no official recognition of our claims to a unique relationship to the place. The Forest Service has proposed regulations on how we use and maintain our family cemeteries. We have informed them that we will not accept their right to regulate our cemeteries. The Forest Service is continuing TVA's efforts to "mitigate" the refuge we began by simply refusing to distinguish it or its significance from the rest of LBL. We have reclaimed the one remaining church, which TVA failed to notice since it was not in use at the time of the occupation. Because no one was using it, they did not bother to destroy it. We are insisting that it is "our" church in that it is part of our cultural heritage. We are insisting that it be open to the public, but that no fees ever be charged for its use and that it never be promoted as a tourist attraction. We have our own magazine, containing stories of people from Between the Rivers, and a cemetery project that goes out most weekends to maintain any cemeteries that the families are no longer able to maintain. We are still resisting the Forest Service's attempts to keep the commercial developments TVA put in place prior to the transfer. More is at stake now than just whether the promise will be kept -- even though that promise has always been the lynch pin of our shared experience. Our claim to a unique relationship to our place is now up for grabs. We have no official recognition and thus no legal protections for our cultural properties. Our struggle is only beginning. We have a new generation beginning to get involved now and our commitment is growing, rather than going away as the government had hoped. I began taking courses in sociology to better understand what had been done to us; I now use sociology to better resist the loss of the remnants of our culture.

For more information on the Between the Rivers struggle, feel free to contact the author at DavidL.Nickell@kctcs.net or (270) 554-9200 ext. 6180. Copies of the paper he presented at the recent Rural Sociology Society conference on the use of the "cultural property" in the ongoing struggle can be obtained by contacting the author.