



Gabriel Otto Wessenauer

1906-1990

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Submitted By The Nae Home Secretary

G.O. WESSENAUER, manager of power for the Tennessee Valley Authority for twenty-five years, died on September 30, 1990, at the age of eighty-three.

He was born on October 21, 1906, at Sewickley, Pennsylvania, the son of Gabriel and Meta Schletter Wessenauer. After studying in the local public schools, he entered Carnegie Institute of Technology, where he earned a B.S. in civil engineering. He had a high scholastic standing and was elected to Tau Beta Pi.

G. O. Wessenauer was "Jim" to his family circle and church friends. He was "Wess" to his fellow workers and business and professional associates.

After a total of eight years with the West Virginia Power and Transmission Company and the West Penn Power Company, Wess joined the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as an assistant hydraulic engineer in 1935. He was assistant to the manager of power by 1941, was acting manager of power in 1943, and became manager of power in 1944. He held that position, in which he was in charge of the entire TVA power program, until he retired in January 1970. He then continued to do some consulting for TVA and others.

Wess was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in April 1968. He was a member of the Academy's Steering Committee on Power Plant Siting and of the NRC Commission of Sociotechnical Systems' Committee on Processing and Utilization of Fossil Fuels.

He served on numerous national and international advisory groups concerned with electric power supply, its reliability, its environmental impacts, and research and development of better ways to provide electric service. He served as chairman of the Electric Research Council and as a director of the Atomic Industrial Forum. He was a fellow of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), an honorary life member of the American Public Power Association, and a member of the Chattanooga Engineers Club.

Wess received the Rockefeller Public Service Award for outstanding service to the nation as a federal employee. He was the author of several papers, including one that won the ASCE Collingwood Prize and three papers for World Power Conferences.

It would be impossible to record the illustrious history of the TVA and its power program without referring to Wess time and time again. Likewise, a memorial tribute for Wess would be far from complete without at least a brief review of the story of TVA power. It was he who steered the TVA power program for more than twenty-five years—far longer than any other person. During his stewardship the TVA power system outstripped all others in the nation in size and scope and set records for efficiency and low cost.

The constant goal of Wess and the team he assembled and led was to provide the people of the Tennessee Valley region with an abundant supply of electric energy at the lowest practicable cost. The system's generating capacity was expanded tenfold under his direction. It evolved from a predominantly hydroelectric system to one that included some of the world's largest and most cost-effective coal-burning power plants, and nuclear plants were being added. The major transmission voltage was increased from 161 kilovolts to 500 kilovolts. The cost per kilowatt-hour of electricity use, which TVA had already lowered dramatically, was further reduced.

Wess saw clearly the importance of electric energy in the social and economic development of the region. He worked with the municipal and cooperative systems that distribute TVA power to encourage industrial development and to see that rural distribution lines were extended to every farm and cabin. Fewer than

one rural home in four had electric service when Wess took charge; by the time of his retirement, rural coverage was virtually 100 percent. He and his associates persuaded Congress of the feasibility and wisdom of discontinuing the TVA power program's reliance on congressional appropriations and allowing TVA to issue its own securities.

The *Chattanooga Times* said of Wess: "He sees his job in human terms as well as kilowatts and self-financing plans. He likes to think of the transformation TVA power has wrought in countless farm houses and mountain cabins, where water is now pumped instead of carried, and where modern ranges, refrigerators, and washing machines lighten the housewife's burden."

Although his work was of major importance to an entire region, Wess was a humble, private person. He was a man of spotless integrity. His example was reflected throughout the organization he led; it had an enviable worldwide reputation for quality and effectiveness.

Wess the engineer was ever efficient and usually reserved. But he was also Jim, the loving husband, father, grandfather, and churchman. He was a member of the church council and was a Sunday school teacher for over fifty years. He was preceded in death by his son, the Reverend James Wessenaer, and left his devoted wife, Jenny; daughter, Joy; and six grandchildren.