

Willow Grove, the Town That Drowned

By Darren Shell

Not unlike the fabled city of Atlantis, the old town of Willow Grove, Tennessee, is now under a lavish blanket of water. The murky depths of Dale Hollow Lake still house the shadowy foundations of what was once a beautiful and thriving valley town. The winding and crystal clear waters of the Obey River wound through many small communities and towns as it meandered its way toward the Cumberland. Willow Grove sat along the banks of Irons Creek and was lovingly named from the Willow trees that grew along its shores. For its day, this little town was not so little. It had service stations, churches, general stores, and one of the largest school buildings within miles. It even had a large gymnasium, where children rode horse-back to basketball games. A large grist mill sat in the middle of what is now Willow Grove Campground, and it overlooked the bustling Tennessee Highway 53 that cut through the center of town. The clip-clop of hooves echoed through the streets as wagons were drawn by horses and mules, and the chuckles of children scampering through the streets filled the air. The crisp, clean air smelled of freshly cut hay and the wisps of smoke from the fires burning in the kitchen cook stoves. And life was grand.



And then it happened. The year was 1942. The once cheerful and quaint valley town of Willow Grove was now forlorn and solemn. Aside from the sad sights of the town's men marching off to World War II, the residents faced a horrific and depressing dilemma. The government was forcing the families and friends of this closely-knit community to move away. The United States government was buying their property. It was demolishing their homes and businesses...to build a dam. The farm fields tilled by their forefathers were now dozed clean of fences and barns. The ever incessant sounds of

chainsaws hummed day in and day out. Bonfires were kindled in every field and the loud claps of dynamite shook the earth. And the beautiful little valley town of Willow Grove now looked like a war zone.

Despite the anguish in their hearts, the community gathered one last time before the move. On July 18, 1942, the people of Willow Grove united at a town picnic. The Corps of Engineers set it up and made certain that county agents were on hand to help the townspeople with the inevitable move. Amid the anger and sadness, one of the town's most beloved members gave a particularly moving speech. Dr. Edward Clark convinced the people of Willow Grove to press forward and offered hope to those forced to move. His words softened the blow of moving. And for the people of Willow Grove, Father Time pressed on, and the water did rise.

In the years that followed, the rough terrain around the lake began to take shape. Marinas were built where the old roads entered the lake. Tiny wooden boats dotted the shores and people all over the country were beginning to love this special lake named Dale Hollow, in remembrance of the Dale family that owned the large tract of land that now houses a giant chunk of concrete that holds back billions of gallons of water. Dale Hollow Dam now stands in remembrance of William Dale and the hundreds of his descendents that now populate the surrounding communities.

The people of old Willow Grove still get together once a year for a reunion. On Sunday of Labor Day weekend, once again the familiar voices of the townspeople fill the air as memories flow and laughter helps heal the hearts of those that still mourn the loss of their old home town.



*THE WILLOW GROVE CROWD was estimated to have climbed near to 700
before the homecoming came to a close.*

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So, when your feet dangle in the cool, clear water of Dale Hollow, and your face is warmed by the brilliant colors of the setting sun, give a little thank you to the people of old Willow Grove and its surrounding communities. Say a little prayer for those who endured the hardships of this lake's making. And remember in your heart...that these shores contain so very much more than just water.

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