Clarion Review

History

Innovative Solutions: A History of R&D at Southern Company

Sam Heys
Elena Mappus, editor
Southern Company
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Heys' crisp and concise writing takes corporate history to a new level.

The creative men behind one of the country's most innovative electric utility holding companies are spotlighted and their four decades of research and development detailed in *Innovative Solutions*, a fascinating story that even a novice can understand.

Founded in 1945, Southern Company covers 120,000 square miles of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi. It was forced to make changes as a result of higher electrical usage demands following World War II; demands that created challenges in several areas—technical, operational, and environmental—that needed solving. Bill Harrison, a university professor who had previously worked on the Manhattan Project, was hired in 1969 to help build and oversee a research and development team to work on these challenges. This is their story.

The author, Sam Heys, is an employee of Southern Company and author of two previous books, including another about his employer and *The Winecoff Fire: The Untold Story of America's Deadliest Hotel Fire*. A very talented writer, Heys digs deep into the personal history of his subjects and parlays that material into such lines as this one: "When Steve McQueen was studying for his award-winning role in the 1963 film classic *The Great Escape*, he came to Birmingham, Alabama, to eat dinner with (Southern Company CEO Alvin) Vogtle (a former POW who had escaped) and learn all he could."

Heys' writing is crisp and concise, weaving cultural and social history of government regulations (such as the Clean Air Act) and relevant topics (acid rain, being "environmentally conscious") into how the "brain trust" from Southern Company dealt with them. Heys infuses true storytelling into what are normally very dry topics.

Though it's probably not everyone's idea of typical reading matter, the book does hold one's attention due to its careful crafting and deft and simple explanations of unfamiliar terms. The author doesn't talk down to his readers, he explains and entertains as this engrossing tale unfolds. For example, "The industry responded swiftly to waylay the government's intentions (to tax utilities), forming its own research organization to find solutions to common problems–the Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI)."

Numerous photographs of individuals and locations mentioned in the text enhance and expand the story. Also included are a very in-depth index and a thirty-two-page "Research Timeline" that covers watershed moments in the industry from 1916 up to 2012. For example, three statements are listed under 1970, including "the first national 'Earth Day' is held April 22."

Though it might be deemed an in-house publication for the Southern Company, this well-written history of the personalities behind its innovative research and development team over the past forty years is an important document for anyone wanting to delve deeper into a widely relevant and important subject.

Robin Farrell Edmunds