

A Golden Anniversary for the Blue Ridge Parkway

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“Something borrowed, something blue, something old, something new, and a penny in your shoe!” As far-fetched as it may sound, this traditional wedding-day rhyme is an appropriate christening verse for the Blue Ridge Parkway on its Golden Anniversary, September 11, 1985.

All the ingredients are there. “Something borrowed” was a consulting landscape architect borrowed from the Westchester County Parks in New York. “Something blue” was, most obviously, the magnificent range of mountains widely known as the Blue Ridge. “Something old” was represented by the grand old remnants of mountain buildings so familiar to parkway travelers—Mabry Mill, Puckett Cabin, Brinegar Cabin, and so forth. “Something new” was the startling proposal to build almost 500 miles of rural parkway solely dedicated to leisurely motoring—at a time when the entire nation was in the midst of the disastrous Great Depression. “And a penny in your shoe” stood for the federal government, in the form of money from the Public Works Administration (PWA) to get the project started as work relief.

The Blue Ridge Parkway was, indeed, a Depression-born project, designed to link the Shenandoah and Great Smokey Mountains national parks and to provide jobs for the unemployed. Many people appreciated the splendid natural beauty of the area and approved of the proposed parkways. Others, however, were die-hard opponents, like the Ohio congressman who peevishly labeled the parkway “the most gigantic and stupendously extravagant and unreasonable expenditure made by the most extravagantly expensive administration in the history of the world.”

For romance and history, the Blue Ridge Parkway is unbeatable. American Indians traveled along its ridges for centuries before Europeans discovered America. Archaeological finds at such places as Peaks of Otter and Humpback Rocks plainly indicate that American Indians found the area just as attractive as modern visitors do. Pioneers struggled through bitter mountain winters to establish homesteads on the rocky soil. Many battles raged over and among these mountains, too. The combatants fought in Indian wars, the American Revolution War, the Civil War, and most recently in training maneuvers for World War II, when American soldiers used the parkway area to learn the art of fighting in mountainous terrain before shipping off to the real battlefields.

There is also a mystery about who originated the parkway. There is no set answer. There were very early efforts, such as the Crest of the Blue Ridge Highway undertaken by North Carolina adventurers between 1909 and 1912. This toll road also was planned as a scenic drive with food and lodging accommodations. A tiny portion was built, but the coming of World War I ended further construction. In 1930 a Kentucky congressman proposed “a park-to-park highway,” linking the nation’s capital with all the national parks in the East. It too failed.

The coming of the Great Depression brought a renewed effort involving two men who each claimed to be the “father of the Blue Ridge Parkway”: Harry F. Byrd and Theodore E. Straus. Byrd was a United States senator from Virginia, and Straus was an adviser for the PWA. Each vigorously declared that the idea was his. Two things are certain. Byrd became the central figure in getting the parkway accepted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and in getting construction started using federal relief funds. He also was the man who enlisted the aid of North Carolina and Tennessee, indicating that North Carolina would receive 140 miles of road while Tennessee would receive 95 miles.

The minute the news media picked up and broadcast the possibility of a scenic highway linking the two great national parks, every interested party immediately shouted, “Run it our way!” The question of route location produced three huge battles. First, there was a very long, exciting contest between North Carolina and Tennessee over which state would get the lion’s share of mileage. Settling this dispute took many months and much lobbying. North Carolina argued that the parkway should leave the Virginia border and run down to Mount Pisgah, and on into the Smoky Mountains—thereby favoring Asheville as a tourist city. Tennessee diligently opposed this plan. That state recommended that the parkway leave Virginia, run to Linville, North Carolina, and then cut northward across Roan Mountain into the Smokey Mountains via Gatlinburg—thereby favoring Knoxville. North Carolina officials contended that their route was more scenic, cheaper, and full of variety. Tennessee leaders replied that three presidents had had the good sense to leave North Carolina and move to Tennessee, and that five rivers had done the same! In the end, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes sided with North Carolina. Tennessee got nothing, much to its dismay.

A second battle erupted over routing the parkway through the Cherokee Indian Reservation. Federal officials desired to run it through the center of the town of Cherokee. The American Indians flatly rejected this. After many months of haggling, they won their battle, and the parkway was forced to bypass Cherokee.

The third battle was really terrific. The issue centered on where the parkway would go around Grandfather Mountain. Federal authorities wanted a “high” road, but the owner of the mountain only offered a “low” road. This battle continued for years, involving politicians, environmentalists, lobbyists, and four North Carolina governors. Finally, a “middle” road was accepted as a compromise.

In the meantime, other details were hammered out. The motorway was designated a parkway, and it was assigned to the National Park Service for administration and to the Bureau of Public Roads for construction. Virginia and North Carolina agreed to secure and donate the necessary land. In return, the federal government would design, construct, and maintain the road. Since the road was a national parkway, no commercial traffic could use it, no hotdog stands or billboards would be permitted, and there would be limited access to the road.

Every step taken was a pioneering one because there was no model to go by. Virginia and North Carolina had to enact special legislation to acquire the necessary land. Even the task of locating the best route was enormous. Much of the land had never been mapped, and the whole region

was isolated and rugged. Rattlesnakes, yellow jackets, and wary mountaineers provided plenty of excitement. Actual construction began on September 11, 1935. Construction has continued, off and on, since that date. World War II forced a shutdown, but the project was quickly resumed after the war ended.

Today, the parkway is just three miles short of completion. It has become the most popular unit in the national park system and has earned many honors, including “The Most Scenic Road in America” award. The original cost was estimated at \$16 million, but it will probably exceed \$150 million when completed. The project has provided many jobs and exciting travel for millions of people. Among those laboring to bring it to success were local men put to work by the Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, conscientious objectors during World War II, Youth Conservation Corps workers, and career employees of the National Park Service.

Talented people have lavished their attentions on the development of this national treasure. Some have been rewarded by having recreational areas named for them, such as the “E. B. Jeffress Park” named in honor of the man who prevented the parkway from becoming a toll road. In behalf of the parkway workers over the past fifty years, Governor Dan K. Moore very poetically said, “I hope that it will endure as a monument to all those who seek to give North Carolina something of themselves, who lose themselves in her work, and who thereby find their future entwined with hers.” The Blue Ridge parkway is that monument.

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