

November 17, 2009

At 75, the parkway needs work

http://www.newsobserver.com/opinion/columnists_blogs/other_views/story/195533.html

At one time it was to be called the Appalachian Scenic Highway. In 1933, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes was calling it the "Park-to-Park Highway." Two years later, an N.C. highway official called it the "Shenandoah-Great Smoky Mountains National Parkway."

And local folks along the escarpment that rises above the N.C.-Virginia Piedmont - many of whom would be unhappily moved out of the way or paid a pittance for their property - would call it simply "the Scenic."

Fortunately there was a better name, and Congress codified it in 1936: The Blue Ridge Parkway, the longest linear park in the country and the most visited of the National Park Service's stunning array of refuges and retreats.

The parkway, launched in 1934, is celebrating its 75th anniversary now. Virginia started its celebration last year, while the N.C. celebration began over the weekend with festivities in Asheville and other points along its 469-mile route.

In a way, it traces its lineage back more than a century, to the time when N.C. State geologist Joseph Pratt came up with the idea for a scenic toll road down the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains from Marion, Va., to Tallulah, Ga., a Park Service history notes. About a mile of his proposed road was eventually incorporated into the Blue Ridge Parkway near Altapass, where CSX Corp. and the Conservation Trust of North Carolina have just preserved some 1,500 acres to keep the scenic landscape intact.

That's a pressing concern all along the parkway now as second-home builders and retirees look for a place to build along the parkway - and as homes, residential developments and commercial properties crowd in along the route and mar the rural vistas the park aimed to preserve.

As many unsuspecting parkway fans learned in Ann Mitchell Whisnant's provocative and informative "Super Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History" published in 2006 by UNC Press, the parkway did more than take advantage of mountain scenery. In many cases it shaped, nurtured and manufactured the roadside scenery and embellished some attractions.

But the result has been simply spectacular for a roadway that took more than half a century to build and wasn't complete until the 1980s. Its gently curving roadway, interpretive sites, frequent overlooks and charming backdrops such as Mabry Mill (its image was once found on postcards proclaiming "Welcome to Connecticut" and the like) are an easily accessible respite from the rigors of urban life in the Piedmont. From Charlotte you can be above it all on the parkway in a couple of hours.

We almost didn't get the parkway. President Franklin Roosevelt was discussing it as a link between the Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains parks in the depths of the Depression, and Virginia Sen. Harry Flood Byrd was an early promoter. There were several routes from which

to choose, and an early study committee recommended the parkway pass from Virginia through Tennessee. Promoters in North Carolina, including The News & Observer's Josephus Daniels and E.B. Jeffress of the Greensboro Daily News, worked with many others to persuade the federal government to choose the North Carolina route. On Nov. 10, 1934, Ickes ended this War Between the States, as the parkway history called it, and chose the Tar Heel route.



I first saw the parkway as a boy in the mid-1950s when my family took a late summer trip along its finished sections. I don't think I'd ever been cold in August before, but the evening mists enveloping the stately trees at Doughton Park and the moonlight ride on the parkway near Roanoke to see the big lighted star on Mill Mountain have been vivid memories for more than half a century.

We spent a night at an old CCC camp near Rocky Knob at the head of the Rock Castle Gorge, staying in weathered log cabins that my father and I enjoyed a lot more than my mother and sister. Today we have a cabin just a couple miles from the Rocky Knob Housekeeping Cabins, as they are called, and in summertime they're still a popular stop for return travelers who have stayed at the cabins every summer for years.

But as fine as the parkway has been, it's worn around the edges, understaffed because of federal budget pressures and in many places in need of a refit. We drove up the parkway to the Skyline Drive a year ago and were disappointed to see that a number of overlooks were closed for lack of maintenance or just overgrown.

This was as inevitable as the daily sunsets and seasonal damps. As the region's population has grown, the demand for building lots has grown while parkway budgets have struggled to meet basic needs for such things as split-rail fences.

And in a park where the width of the entire route averages just 800 feet, and where about two-thirds of the land abutting the parkway is in private hands, the available stock of scenic vistas shrinks steadily. Land trusts and foundations and Friends of the Blue Ridge Parkway have all

made valiant efforts to maintain what's there and to protect against encroaching development, but the job is a big one.

If we don't watch out, the very thing that made us love the parkway so will in time become, like that mid-1950s trip, a distant memory.

Jack Betts is a Charlotte Observer columnist and associate editor based in Raleigh.