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## Our Great treasure

THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY CELEBRATES 75 YEARS



Photo courtesy Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau

I recall childhood memories of our family's Sunday drives after church along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Recollections of Mabry Mill and the fresh ground cornmeal settling on my patent leather Mary Jane shoes linger as a sacred piece of my youth. The beautiful views and hike to the Peaks of Otter was always a favorite, as was Sunday brunch at the restaurant there. On one such visit to their gift shop, my parents purchased a beautiful pewter ring for me in the shape of a dogwood flower. I wore that ring for years, and though more than three decades have passed, I still love my first "real" piece of jewelry and reminisce about how thrilled I was to be a proud owner of something apropos to my land, my Parkway.

This fall begins the celebration of the 75th Anniversary of the Blue Ridge Parkway. A non-profit organization, Blue Ridge Parkway 75 has been established to organize events and activities to celebrate the legacy of this national treasure and to educate those in our region about the value of our cultural history. Their vision is to "engage local communities and the nation in efforts to sustain a healthy Blue Ridge Parkway for future generations by celebrating 75 years of Parkway history, Appalachian culture and spectacular scenic views." This magnificent treasure is in our backyard.

In 1933 when Franklin Delano Roosevelt visited Skyline Drive, U.S. Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia suggested that a new road be constructed from Virginia to connect to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina. The proposal was approved and construction began in 1935 as part of FDR's New Deal. Started as a public works project, the construction of the Parkway helped sustain the Appalachian region during the Great Depression.

This was also the beginning of car tourism and this region's recognition of the beauty and rich history inherent in our area. Stanley Abbott, a young Cornell graduate and landscape architect from New York was hired as the first acting superintendent of the Parkway. His naturalist conception of this project as a chain of parks and recreational areas was critical in the Parkway's development by protecting the viewsheds and creating and protecting Appalachian scenery and culture—"a museum of managed American countryside." Many of the architectural features include 168 bridges and grade separation structures all built with indigenous materials to harmonize with the environment. Abbott, referred to as the father of the Blue Ridge Parkway, relocated from New York to Salem, Virginia where he and his wife raised a family.

The original plan was to route the 469 mile Parkway from Shenandoah National Park into North Carolina, then cross the Unaka Mountains into Tennessee for the final leg into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This approach created great friction between Tennessee and North Carolina due to the tremendous tourism potential. After much debate and lobbying from both states, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes authorized the route from Virginia through North Carolina, excluding Tennessee.

Work was halted over the years due to the war, funding, and the final piece of this road, the missing link, 7.7 miles at Grandfather Mountain. The owner of the mountain was concerned with its fragile ecosystem, and after years of negotiations, the National Park Service finally reached an agreement with the landowner to build the Linn Cove Viaduct which carries the parkway over the shoulder of the mountain, keeping the integrity of the fragile terrain intact. In 1987, this last leg of the Parkway was complete.

At the unveiling of plans for the Blue Ridge Parkway 75 event last fall, Governor Tim Kaine stated, "The Blue Ridge Parkway is the quintessential American travel experience and a prime example of sustainable tourism. Virginia is proud to celebrate 75 years of conservation, education and outdoor recreation that the Parkway offers to visitors and our residents."

With more than 19 million visitors each year (excluding commuter traffic), the Blue Ridge Parkway is the most visited of the 391 National Parks, with more visitors than Yosemite, the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone combined. The economic impact from a 1990s study is considerable with visitors spending in excess of \$2.3 billion each year in Parkway communities. Spanning 29 counties, with elevations from 649 feet at the James River to 6,047 feet at Richland Balsam, North Carolina, this route is the highest and longest continuous road in the Appalachian area.

Penny Lloyd, Virginia Coordinator for Blue Ridge Parkway 75 states, "As adults, we must reconnect with nature and educate our children about our heritage. We must teach them to be good stewards of this national treasure, so that future generations can celebrate again 75 years from now."

According to Blue Ridge Parkway 75 organizers, the Parkway is "one of the most biologically diverse places in the temperate portion of our planet and is [in the top 3] of the most diverse units in the National Parks Service. It contains more species of trees than all of Europe and a number of protected plant species. [The Parkway] has more diversity of habitat and supports more plant species than any other park in the U.S. Park System."

The task of preserving "natural resources due to commercial and residential encroachment, air and water quality issues, and a lack of sufficient funding all [pose threats] to this valuable and vulnerable corridor." Thankfully, Parkway advocates are actively pursuing the continued preservation of this Great Treasure.

Blue Ridge Parkway 75 organizers have planned exciting events along the scenic 469 mile route over the next year. For more information on the Parkway, scheduled events, volunteering, or to make a donation, please visit [www.blueridgeparkway75.org](http://www.blueridgeparkway75.org).

Susan lives with her husband and children in Roanoke City. She has been a columnist with Bella magazine for over three years.