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A Conversation with Anne Mitchell Whisnant

Author of *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History*

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Q: What inspired you to write the history of the Blue Ridge Parkway?

A: I came to love the North Carolina mountains the summer I turned 10, when my family spent six weeks at Lake Junaluska United Methodist Assembly, near Waynesville. When I returned to Junaluska to work during my college years in the late 1980s, I rediscovered the Parkway. Later, when I was becoming a professional historian, I realized the Parkway had a fascinating and complicated history that had never been written—partly, it seemed, because no one thought there was much to say beyond a few anecdotes about design and construction. When I learned that the Eastern Cherokees had fought the Parkway construction for five years in the 1930s, I knew there was more to the story, and I set out to write about the Parkway's complicated past.

Q: What were some of the highlights of your fifteen years of research on the Parkway?

A: There are several, but one was when I began my research in the Parkway's Asheville archive, when it was housed in an abandoned Veteran's Administration hospital dormitory. There was no electricity and no archival staff. I read by the window light and later took notes on a laptop computer connected to an AC/DC converter hooked to my car's cigarette lighter. Another memorable moment was when I was driven up the steep and curvy Grandfather Mountain road in a monsoon rain by then-eighty-three-year-old mountain owner Hugh Morton, who insisted on stopping the car to get out and take photographs of the cascading water.

Q: While doing your research, did you at first intend to challenge the myths and beliefs that surrounded the making of the Parkway or did your exploration lead you there?

A: When I started, I believed many of the myths! The first book about the Parkway's history I read was Harley Jolley's *The Blue Ridge Parkway*, which primarily popularized the mythical history. Until I got into the archives, I had no reason to think that much of what he wrote was misleadingly simple. The key for me was to have a direct encounter with the historical documents—to let the voices of the past speak to me. If following those voices has meant overturning myths, it is only because I have sought to be as true as I can be to the history.

Q: Why do you think the popular myth of the Parkway—that it "was miraculously laid on the land"—has flourished while the actual history is virtually unknown?

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Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 966.3561, ext. 234

Fax [919] 966.3829 | E-mail: Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu

A: I think this has happened largely because the myth appears to fit what people see, and want to see, when they travel the Parkway. The Parkway is a carefully designed landscape that presents a very controlled, picturesque scene. Behind that scene are complicated, messy, sometimes not-very-pretty stories about what was there before and how the Parkway came to be. Over the years the traces of those stories on the landscape have been all but wiped away by the National Park Service. When most people see what remains—the peaceful, apparently undisturbed natural landscape with a few rough-hewn buildings—they have trouble imagining that the Parkway's creation was not easy. Additionally, most Parkway history has been written either by people within the National Park Service or by people with backgrounds in landscape architecture. These studies have tended to focus on the Parkway's design, neglecting other equally important people, perspectives, and forces. Hence, almost no one has revisited the historical documents to see what they actually say. I myself was surprised by the conflicted stories they revealed.

Q: What's the story behind the title, *Super-Scenic Motorway*?

A: The title comes from an article written by early Parkway designer Stanley W. Abbott for a 1941 travel booklet called the *Eastern National Park-to-Park Annual and The Blue Ridge Parkway Guide*: "The Blue Ridge Parkway: 500-mile Super-Scenic Motorway: A New Element in Recreational Planning within Day's Drive of 60,000,000 People." Although I found the article very early in my research, I rediscovered it when the book was nearly finished. I was captivated by the simple-but-catchy descriptiveness of "Super-Scenic Motorway," and was pleased to re-use a phrase that dated from the Parkway's early development.

Q: There are a number of photos in your book, many of historical significance. How did you decide which to include? Do you have a favorite?

A: Since my book does explore the Parkway's history and is not another coffee table book or travel guide, I wanted to try to do something different with my photographs. I tried to include images that sharpened the stories told in the book. One of my favorites depicts the early timbering of Grandfather Mountain, while another clearly shows the relationship of the Parkway to the road that takes visitors to the privately owned Mile-High Swinging Bridge at the mountain's peak. These two images—which I spent months seeking—contradict a popular myth about the mountain's history and were difficult to locate. The mountain's owner would not release an early postcard he had published showing the road to the Bridge, and Park Service staff members did not believe they had any Grandfather Mountain photographs. It was exciting to find them in the Parkway headquarters a few weeks before the manuscript went into production.

Q: You note that there are several unresolved issues surrounding the Parkway that you do not expand on in the book. How did you narrow your focus?

A: For every episode I examined in detail, there were many others I could have looked into. The archival record of the Parkway is massive and spread over more than 20 repositories. In order

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to finish this book in my lifetime, I could not talk about every interesting story. So I selected a few that allowed me to cover the major social and cultural issues: the Parkway's origins and context, land acquisition and use, and relationships between the existing private tourist industry and neighboring landowners. The cases I chose were well documented and important, offered new insights into Parkway history, and contained vivid personalities and interesting stories.

Q: What do you hope your readers will take away from your findings? Do you hope to encourage activism on behalf of the Parkway?

A: I hope that readers will understand that creating the Parkway is an ongoing process in which they play key roles. History is happening now. The Parkway did not emerge in a magical time where there were no conflicts and no hard decisions to be made. Rather, it exists because people in the past—people very much like us—made difficult decisions to do some things and not to do others. In order to assure the continued viability of the Parkway, we have to do the same. To the degree that readers see this, I hope they will become activists on the Parkway's behalf. The road is in serious danger at present. It is faced with funding shortfalls, encroaching development, visitor demands, and maintenance backlogs. If we don't make active decisions *now* to protect the Parkway, to re-create *our* Parkway, there won't be a Parkway in another 75 years.

Q: If the Blue Ridge Parkway has more visitors than Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon combined, why do you think it is struggling for funding and employees?

A: Funding of individual parks within the Park Service depends on land base under management, visitation statistics, physical plant expenses, cultural and natural resources in each park, political pressures, public perception of resource values, among other factors. The critical problem for the Parkway, and all national parks, is the serious and prolonged underfunding of the entire National Park Service, likely to worsen with recent orders to cut park budgets. National parks across the country are struggling in the same ways that the Parkway is. The key is to increase funding for all our national parks to the level that is needed to preserve and enhance this vital public legacy.

Q: The Parkway has a very rich history. What do you think is the best way to renovate and maintain it but also to preserve its past?

A: Most important to understand here is that past and present form an unbroken continuum of which we are a part. For the past 75 years, the Parkway has been a work in progress, an evolving landscape shaped and reshaped by many hands. There is no "pure" Parkway to be preserved. To maintain the Blue Ridge Parkway for another 75 years, we need to see ourselves as the road's creators. In that effort, some key principles must be borne in mind that have always characterized this free public road built and supported for the public good with public funds: a wide, protective right-of-way, limited access from adjoining properties, and services to please travelers rather than commercial interests. Continuing to have a Parkway built on these principles has required making difficult decisions that, at some points, have made some people unhappy. In order to

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maintain this Parkway, we will be required to make some of those choices, too.

Q: Do you have any suggestions for lovers of the Parkway who want to aid in its survival?

A: Lobby your congressmen and women to increase funding for the National Park Service, and, more generally, to restore funding for our public services and infrastructure, all of which are seriously underfunded and threatened. In North Carolina and Virginia, push your state legislatures to seek ways to funnel monies to the Parkway. At the same time, work to resist the national mood that asserts that government cannot do anything right. Donate money to private, nonprofit organizations that support the Parkway, such as the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, Friends of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Conservation Trust for North Carolina.

Q: What's your next project?

A: My husband, David Whisnant, and I have recently begun a historical study of the DeSoto National Memorial, a sixty-year-old National Park Service site in Bradenton, Florida, that commemorates the 16th century North American expedition of Spanish conquistador Hernando DeSoto. Under contract with NPS, we are writing the memorial's administrative history, an internal planning document that will help staff manage the park. We hope this will be the first of many applied historical research projects, which use history to influence policy, that we will do under the umbrella of our recently launched consulting firm, Primary Source History Services.

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CONTACTS

Publicity: Gina Mahalek, ext. 234; gina_mahalek@unc.edu
Sales: Michael Donatelli, ext. 232; michael_donatelli@unc.edu
Rights: Vicky Wells, ext. 225; vicky_wells@unc.edu

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