

NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

R. Getty Browning

Putting the Blue Ridge Parkway on the N.C. Map

By Alexa Nota

Seventy-seven years ago, R. Getty Browning went for a walk. His walk lasted several months and 250 miles on a path winding from Cumberland Knob to Cherokee—the route that would become the Blue Ridge Parkway.

That walk was difficult, but the politics and negotiations to keep the parkway in North Carolina proved even more challenging. Browning led that effort with quiet resolve.

September 11, 2010, marks the 75th anniversary of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Though Browning was vital to the achievement of this milestone, he had been overlooked until author and historian Dr. Anne Mitchell Whisnant revived his story and published *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History* in 2006.

After growing up in Maryland, where he acquired a love for the outdoors and expertise in civil engineering, Browning moved to North Carolina in 1921 to work for what would become the N.C. Department of Transportation. At the time, the state's highway system was spider-webbing from city to city as a result of booming highway construction, the rise of the automobile and increased tourism.

The idea of a scenic motorway connecting the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and the Great Smoky Mountain Park in North Carolina arose in the early 1930s during the Great Depression when New Deal programs started reviving the ailing economy. As soon as Browning heard whispers about the parkway and before surveys began, he walked the route, making him one of the few ever to see it all. His arduous trek led him to the best scenic mountain views. He skillfully surveyed and designed the route the Blue Ridge Parkway now weaves through the Appalachians—a route that caused the least damage to the surrounding landscape.

Browning's map ventured into what he called "unbroken wilderness, taking drivers from Cumberland Knob near the Virginia border southwest through Blowing Rock, Linville Falls, Little Switzerland, Asheville and Waynesville to nearby Cherokee. He aimed to create America's most scenic drive and enable drivers to experience the stunning vistas of the Appalachian Mountains, many above 5000 feet and not accessible by foot. No part wandered into Tennessee.

Taking another step toward establishing the

parkway in N.C. Browning submitted his map to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior and Public Works Administration (PWA) head. Ickes was in charge of selecting where the parkway would go and allotting the initial PWA funds to the project, which would cost almost \$130 million when completed in 1987. Ickes' approval of a Blue Ridge Parkway as a stimulus project in 1933 initiated a heated tug-of-war between Tennessee and North Carolina for parkway mileage.

Browning and the state parkway committee completed a route-proposal booklet in early 1934. In February, he spoke at the first major forum for the project in Baltimore, Md. Unlike most members of North Carolina and Tennessee delegations who spoke emotionally—some even said their routes were divined by God—Browning, composed and professional, presented his route with rational arguments and first-hand knowledge of the land.

The route offered by Tennessee supporters took the same path from the North Carolina-Virginia border to Grandfather Mountain but turned the parkway west at Linville into Tennessee to end in Gatlinburg. Instead of riding along high ridgelines, this parkway dipped into valleys and skirted steep slopes to give travelers different views.

He urged prominent civic leaders to advocate for the NC route. Love for North Carolina's mountains underscored Browning's efforts, but the forum helped him realize the need for economic arguments and political maneuvering to support his plan. He bolstered personal accounts and illustrations with arguments for boosting tourism in Asheville and anticipated positive public response.

Browning knew the importance of personal relationships, often leading tours of his route and hosting dinners and hunting trips for members of the Radcliffe committee, the PWA group in charge of routing the parkway. After entertaining visitors with charming, persuasive stories, he often sent them gifts and copies of his map.

Browning kept his resolve and composure when preliminary reports leaked in summer 1934 indicated that the Radcliffe committee favored the Tennessee plan. While other North Carolinians panicked, he hiked on by meeting with Ickes in person and sending him detailed maps and other materials.

At the final parkway hearing in September 1934, state politicians gave Browning the floor



Courtesy of the Harriet Browning Davant collection.

to make North Carolina's case. For an hour, he sang his route's praises, describing it as the most direct, having the best views, passing through Asheville and keeping drivers at high elevations.

He also added a point he had kept in his back pocket: Not all travelers would drive from park to park, so each mile had to have something of its own. The parkway had to be an attraction in itself.

Browning's tact and determination won. On Nov. 10, 1934 Ickes overruled the preliminary committee decision, giving 250 miles of parkway to North Carolina and none to Tennessee.

Construction of the parkway in North Carolina began near Cumberland Knob on Sept. 11, 1935. And until he retired in 1962, Browning dedicated himself to its building, working step by step to ensure that the state acquired the land needed for the parkway. He died in 1966.

Today travelers can stop at View Browning Knob, an overlook named for the summit that honors Browning, at the parkway's southern end, for some of the very views he saw on his first walk through the North Carolina mountains.

Interview. Dr. Anne Mitchell Whisnant, 919.962.1671, Anne_Whisnant@unc.edu.

Whisnant, Anne Mitchell, Dr. *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, October 2006.

www.blueridgeparkway75.org; www.virtualblueridge.com/

Profile written by a student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, UNC-CH. Provided by the N.C. Press Foundation, www.ncpress.com.