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Depression-era projects became tourist draws

Lean beginnings set groundwork for travel industry

By Mark Barrett

Tourism did not pull the city out of the Great Depression, but efforts to attract more visitors that began during that era shaped the leisure travel industry in the area for years to come.

The start of public access to the Biltmore House, establishment of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the opening of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park all occurred during the 1930s, and each event was shaped at least in part by the terrible conditions of the local and national economies.

At the time, these developments had little impact: People uncertain where their next meal was coming from were unlikely to take a leisure trip to the mountains.

Asheville's reliance on tourism "may have impeded the recovery to some degree because people couldn't afford to travel," said Richard Starnes, a Western Carolina University professor who has written a history of tourism in the region. "The market for what Asheville provided just wasn't there."

Even World War II and the resulting national economic turnaround had less impact on Asheville and Western North Carolina than in many parts of the country, and the travel industry was no exception.

"Tourism in Western North Carolina really doesn't start to recover until well after World War II," Starnes says.

Here is a look at the Depression-era origins of what today are some of the region's top attractions.

The Biltmore House

A crowd gathered on the front steps of the Biltmore House in March 1930 to see Cornelia Vanderbilt Cecil, daughter of estate founders George W. and Edith Vanderbilt, and husband John Amherst Cecil open the house to paying guests for the first time.

The cost of admission was \$2 for adults and \$1 for children. That gave visitors access to the first floor of the house and a few rooms on the second, plus the estate grounds, says Darren Poupore, chief curator for The Biltmore Company, the family-owned company that owns the house and estate.

At the time, the move was portrayed as an act of kindness by the Cecils to help boost the local economy. But historians say the Cecils also were short on cash.

Requests by Chamber of Commerce officials that the house be opened to the public allowed the Cecils to establish a source of revenue while saving themselves from the embarrassment of admitting they needed the money.

"It was a way to boost tourism for the city and it was also a way to produce revenue to maintain the estate, so it was a two-way street," Poupore said.

The venture brought in 40,000 visitors the first year, Poupore says, and "was regarded completely as a success."

Southern Railway's Biltmore stationmaster wrote a gushing letter to an estate official: "All the reports I get indicate that visitors are most enthusiastic and are going away walking advertisements."

After that inaugural year, however, interest slackened. A history of the house and gardens says attendance fell to about 30 people per day by 1933 and attendance didn't surpass that of 1930 until after World War II.

The estate is an internationally known tourist attraction today, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors.

But, that's a relatively recent phenomenon: Poupore says the house and gardens didn't break into the black until 1968, when they recorded a profit of \$16 and change.

Blue Ridge Parkway

Lobbying for the Blue Ridge Parkway to be routed through Western North Carolina kept local business leaders busy for part of the 1930s, but neither construction of the road nor its visitors made much of a local impact until after World War II, says Anne Whisnant, a history professor at UNC Chapel Hill who has written a history of the road.

Discussion of a road to connect Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains national parks began in 1933 as a way to put people to work and boost travel.

Local politicians and people in the tourism industry pushed hard for the federal government to choose a route through Western North Carolina instead of east Tennessee and learned they had won that battle in November 1934.

"I think they would say that it was a huge coup to get, but in terms of huge funds flowing into Asheville ... it wouldn't have been something with that short-term impact," Whisnant said.

A section of the parkway that provided access to Mount Mitchell opened late in the decade, but most of the parkway in Buncombe County was not completed until the 1950s and '60s.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

The move to establish the park was already well under way by the time the Depression hit. Getting it established was the subject of lobbying by local leaders in the 1920s to an even greater extent than the parkway route was in the 1930s.

Congress passed legislation in 1926 authorizing creation of the park, but North Carolina and Tennessee had to raise the money to buy the land. The park wasn't officially established until 1934.

Starnes said the effort might have foundered "had the Depression not created the climate to allow (President Franklin) Roosevelt to complete the park."

The park was a major beneficiary of labor from the Civilian Conservation Corps, a public works program that set up camps all over the Smokies so young men could build trails, campgrounds and roads.

The park probably drew relatively few visitors to Asheville at first, Starnes says, but it had long-term implications.

"Tourism in Asheville and Western North Carolina more broadly has always been based on the landscape," he said. "What the park and the parkway do is create attractions that build on that premise, that build on that draw."
