

Wilkes Journal Patriot - Wilkes County's Local Newspaper

# Wilkes Journal-Patriot

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### Parkway meant jobs for many

by Jule Hubbard

(Photo caption) Jule Hubbard/staff photo-John Earl McGrady of Traphill is on a portion of the Blue Ridge Parkway he worked on in the late 1930s. Air Bellows Gap is in Allegheny County near the Wilkes County line.

EDITOR'S NOTE: First in a series of occasional stories about the Blue Ridge Parkway in connection with the 75th anniversary of the start of construction of the highway.

The crest of the great blue wall that forms much of Wilkes County's northern and western boundaries was a beehive of construction for the newly-named Blue Ridge Parkway in the spring of 1937.

At the foot of the Blue Ridge escarpment in Traphill, 16-year-old John Earl McGrady was determined to get a job on a Parkway construction crew—despite being underage.

Telling the man in Wilkesboro who hired for Salem, Va.-based Albert Brothers Construction Co. that he was 18, McGrady was soon clearing Parkway ditch lines and installing culverts near U.S. 21 in Allegheny County.

"Sam Hinchler and I would walk from his father's home (Jim Hinchler place in Traphill) and go up Elk Spur Road to Roaring Gap," and from there along U.S. 21 to the Parkway, said McGrady, now 88 and living on Grissel Tail Road in Traphill. Much of the route they took is now the John P. Frank Parkway and Oklahoma Road near Stone Mountain State Park.

McGrady and Hinchler boarded during the week at Howard Royall's home in Allegheny and returned to Traphill on weekends.

Paid about 30 cents per hour, McGrady worked through the summer but quit in the fall to help his father, Moss Dewitt McGrady, harvest a crop of sugarcane and make molasses near their home off Longbottom Road.

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He started working on the Parkway again a little over a year later as one of hundreds of young men from the area in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a federal public works program focused on natural resources to provide relief during the Great Depression.

The Parkway itself was firmly rooted in the New Deal policy of public works to bring the nation out of the Depression. Mostly through the CCC (started in 1933) or construction companies with federal contracts, the Parkway provided jobs for thousands of men in western North Carolina in the 1930s.

One argument for funding the Parkway was that few economically depressed mountain people would leave the mountains for work, wrote Dr. Harley E. Jolley of Mars Hill in "The Blue Ridge Parkway." Jolley quoted U.S. Congressman Robert Doughton of Laurel Springs, a strong Parkway advocate, as saying, "The only way to help them is to give them employment and the only way to do it is to bring the development to them."

McGrady and many others from Wilkes were based at a CCC camp established in the fall of 1938 just off the Parkway in Laurel Springs, where there now are Parkway maintenance facilities. Others from Wilkes were at Camp James, a CCC camp started in 1934 near Rendezvous Mountain in Purlear. Camp James usually had 250-300 men, while the Laurel Springs camp typically had 150-200.

CCC enrollees signed up for six months, with the option of serving as long as two years. They were issued uniforms and provided lodging and meals with military-style barracks and mess halls. Pay was \$30 per month, with \$22 to \$25 sent home to the enrollee's parents or dependents.

A front page story in the March 16, 1936, issue of The Journal-Patriot announced the start of construction and many new jobs for a 30-mile section of the "scenic parkway" from Airbellows Gap in Alleghany to Benge Gap in Wilkes.

The first dirt was turned for the Parkway on Pack Murphy's farm in Alleghany, just south of the Virginia line, on Sept. 11, 1935.

The Journal-Patriot's front page stories in 1936 and 1937 reported a steady rise in employment for area people on the Parkway. The newspaper's April 23, 1936, issue declared, "To use 1,500 on scenic parkway in summer."

Parkway news occasionally was tragic. The Journal-Patriot's front page on March 23, 1936, reported that Ben Whittington, a young man from Wilkes, was killed in an accident while working on the Parkway near Waynesboro, Va.

McGrady was injured but survived a serious accident in 1940, his last year with the CCC. He and others in the CCC camp from Laurel Springs were in a truck that flipped over while headed south on N.C. 18 to help with cleanup in North Wilkesboro after the disastrous flood of August 1940.

He worked in the CCC camp kitchen after being injured. Also while in the CCC, he helped remove dead timber, plant grass, slope banks with rakes and did various other work along the Parkway. "We would also fight forest fires. We were kind of like a fire department," said McGrady.

Although he could walk home on weekends by taking a trail along Basin Creek and over a ridge through Doughton Park, McGrady sometimes stayed in camp for Saturday night square dances with live music. "They would go off and get a bunch of girls from North Wilkesboro, West Jefferson and elsewhere," he said.

People in the camp that he knew from home included Grady Myers, Paul Brooks and Mason Caudill. Others he remembers from the camp include Gilbert Miller, Winford Miller, Bradley Phillips and Jim Shumate.

Shumate, raised on Chestnut Mountain near Dehart, was known for playing the fiddle during his year at the CCC camp. Shumate later played fiddle with Bill Monroe in the Bluegrass Boys. He now lives in Hickory and, in an interview, said he enjoyed his time in the CCC.

McGrady agreed and said, "That CCC camp. I enjoyed it. It was a good place to be." McGrady married a neighbor, Nancy Hutchison, just before he left the CCC.

"Every once in a while we would hire someone to take us in a car. We would get off on Friday evening and we were supposed to be back on Monday night. It was like being in the Army. They had to have bed check every night to check to see that you were there."

Riding on the Parkway between N.C. 18 and U.S. 21 earlier this month while being interviewed, McGrady frequently saw things that prompted memories.

Passing through where a deep cut was made in rocks for the Parkway, he said he was still amazed at the work. McGrady commented, "How did they ever get through this steep mountain to drill and blast?"

He recalled all the rock that had to be blasted when the Parkway was constructed around a steep slope now called the Ice Rocks, just south of the Bluffs Restaurant in the Doughton Park section of the Parkway.

"That was something there. I remember one time we were working out there and getting old dead timber and they set off this big blast. And it blew the whole mountain down it seemed."

He pointed out where the Parkway goes over the site of the home of Jack Holloway, his great uncle, just south of U.S. 21.

"They had to move Jack's house because the road was going right through where it stood.... When they came out there and started surveying and a fellow told him they were going to move his house, Jack came out there with a shotgun and ran them off," said McGrady.

"But, they talked him into it later when he found out he was going to get a good price for moving it.... They moved the house just beyond the right of way, but Jack later sold out and moved to Roaring River."

Seeing the rock overpass bridge for U.S. 21 beneath the Parkway, McGrady thought about the men from Italy who built that and other Parkway bridges.

"It was unbelievable what they could do with rocks, but some of those CCC boys got to where they could lay rock pretty good too," he said.

Decades later, most of these rock bridges and walls remain as testimonies to skill and hard physical labor.

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