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## Spruce Pine one of Western North Carolina towns reaping tourism gains from Blue Ridge Parkway

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The owners of the Orchard at Altapass took North Carolina to court when the state proposed acquiring 200 acres of the apple orchard to create the Blue Ridge Parkway in the 1930s.

The owners at the time ran a wholesale apple business and did not see the benefit of having the scenic road come through the middle of their land, said the orchard's current owner Bill Carson.

"They knew it was inevitable that it was going to go through, but they argued that it would cause more damage than good," he said. "I don't know if they ever thought the traffic would be much up there."

More than 70 years later, the parkway has not destroyed the orchard. In fact, said Carson, it may be the thing that saved it.

Although apple growing in the region has declined, the orchard's location on the Mitchell-McDowell county line on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and Carson's transformation of the orchard into a place to experience local culture and history, has helped the Historic Orchard at Altapass become a stop for 60,000 parkway visitors each year, about half of which Carson estimates are nonlocal travelers.

### A major driver of tourism

"Even if people had been aggressive about keeping it going (as an apple orchard), I think it would be gone by now," Carson said. "Without the parkway, the orchard would not exist."

As the nation's most-visited national park unit, the Blue Ridge Parkway is a major driver of tourism in Western North Carolina and is often said to be a gateway into the 29 counties and dozens of communities along its 469-mile route.

More than 16 million visitors spent more than \$340 million in local economies in 2008, according to the National Park Service. One estimate puts the economic impact of the parkway as high as \$2.3 billion a year.

"It really does bring more visitors to the small towns of Appalachian North Carolina," said Richard Starnes, a professor at Western Carolina University. "I will say that because the park took the route it did, it did bring prosperity to areas of WNC through tourism that otherwise would not have experienced it."

For rural towns and communities that lie on or near the parkway, the scenic road has become a major part of their identity and their economy.

Gina Phillips's grandfather helped to build the parkway as part of the Works Progress Administration, and Phillips always takes tourists to her favorite rock on the scenic road.

"It is a huge part of who we are and, without a doubt, it has a huge economic impact on us," said the Spruce Pine resident whose family has lived in Mitchell County for generations.

### Spruce Pine

Spruce Pine grew up around the railroad and the mining industry, and tourism that existed before the

parkway mainly revolved around two industries, said Chris Hollifield, who has co-authored a history on the town.

Tourism from the parkway has led to growth of the town near the scenic road, including the appearance of fast-food restaurants and a Walmart, Hollifield said. The town recently passed a law to allow alcohol, which Hollifield said will help attract more businesses, and the local community college is starting a tourism and hospitality program.

"There has been a lot of change that the road has created here," said David Biddix, Hollifield's co-author.

Shirley Hice, director of the Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce, said the parkway has a "huge economic impact," which is most often felt when the parkway is closed. The county's occupancy and retail tax dropped 20 percent when sections of the parkway were closed following hurricanes in 2004.

Hice and others said tourism and the parkway are becoming increasingly important to rural counties like Mitchell County, where the unemployment rate as of August was more than 13 percent.

"The economic base that they had, furniture, tobacco and textiles, have really been in decline in the last 10 years, and so the Blue Ridge Parkway, which has always been important, is now really important," said Dana Clark, a professor of hospitality and tourism at Appalachian State University. "It is a vital economic feeder to counties that are desperate for economic feeders."

## The early days of the parkway

When the parkway was being built, its economic benefits may not have been initially apparent to some landowners and communities along the route. They realized that its wide right-of-way, limited access and noncommercial use would mean it would be difficult to capitalize on the parkway, according to Anne Whisnant, a professor at UNC Chapel Hill and author of "Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History."

Whisnant said the park service was not adverse to tourism, but was intent on preserving the scenic quality of the parkway, which meant no signs or billboards on the route and few turnoffs.

"It is a huge conundrum," she said. "You don't want to do it in a way that ruins the attraction."

The question over what types of facilities would be developed on the parkway, and how local communities would play a role in providing concessions to visitors, escalated after World War II, Whisnant said. The park service embarked on Mission 66, a plan to drastically increase construction and facilities on the parkway they said were lacking in local communities along the route.

Whisnant said these plans put the park service at odds with the local business community in some towns.

"The business community felt like the park was a little bit uncooperative, or not doing all it could to encourage regional business," she said.

These tensions and a need to promote businesses in communities around the parkway led to the formation of the Blue Ridge Parkway Association in the 1950s. Today, the association has its directory and travel planner listing its 600 members at about two dozen visitor centers on the parkway.

## Business and the parkway today

The relationship between the parkway and local communities has improved as the park service has embarked on more partnerships, like the one they have with the Blue Ridge Parkway Association, and tourism has grown in the region.

Parkway superintendent Phil Francis said issues between the park service and local communities exist today, like the limit on commercial signs on the road and decisions to close the parkway during bad weather.

But he said the parkway and its communities now work together for each other's benefit. The

parkway's 75th anniversary, which kicked off Friday, is focused on promoting the relationship.

"The journey people take down the parkway is more than the parkway itself," Francis said. "It's the trails along the park, it's the special vistas, but it is also the experience the communities provide to our visitors."

"The quality of the visitor experience is determined not only by how well we do our jobs on the park but also by how well people do their jobs in the local communities," he said.

In Spruce Pine, the relationship between the community and the parkway is apparent at the Museum of North Carolina Minerals. The town's chamber of commerce runs the visitor center there and at one time the chamber had its headquarters there.

The parkway also sends visitors into the town. About half of the Richmond Inn's visitors come from the parkway, said owner Maggie Haskell.

Jerri's Seafood and Steaks sees a lot of parkway travelers during the spring, summer and fall, said owner Jerri Hughes.

"We probably would be hurting if we didn't have the parkway," she said.

## The future

The parkway will continue to play a big role, if not a bigger role, in Spruce Pine, said Van Phillips, a former county commissioner and former president of the Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce.

"We would love to have our manufacturing back, but it's probably not coming back, and we are glad to have the tourists and the traffic," he said.

Carson is pushing for bigger growth of nonprofits like his orchard that are focused on preserving the culture and heritage of the mountains. He said while his orchard doesn't employ a lot of people, it does drive visitors into the local communities.

"The orchard is never going to be a huge economic driver," Carson said, "but it can be a huge cultural engine that can grow into a huge economic engine for the community."

Phillips and others said while the parkway and tourism are playing bigger role in the economy of Mitchell County, they realize that they are not the answer to the county's economic woes, and the county is also recruiting industry and trying to grow small business.

Hospitality industry jobs often don't pay as much and are more seasonal than other industries, and the tourism industry can be more susceptible to economic downturns.

"A lot of people look at it as a panacea," Biddix said of tourism.

"I do think it plays a role, but in terms of the long-term health of the community, they have to address a lot of issues more than just bringing folks in."

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