

# I Thought I Knew The Parkway



## A meditation on the magic of a motorcycle...

**M**y love affair with the Blue Ridge Parkway began just over 30 years ago with a mid-November ride along one of the most popular sections: the brief stretch between U.S. 321 and U.S. 221 outside Blowing Rock, N.C. My family had come too late to enjoy the blaze of fall color, but that didn't matter. The near-leafless trees fascinated me with their gray, crooked, finger-like branches, and I discovered magic in the way the land rolled and the parkway curved.

Over the years, I returned to the parkway again and again to drink in its intoxicating aura. I'm not embarrassed to admit that often I ride along like a dog: my head out the window, the wind in my face, soaking in the splendor.

I've searched for woodchucks sitting tall in the grass along the edge, camped in the rain in Doughton Park and listened to thunder first rumble near and then slowly recede away. I've hunted for wildflowers of every season. I've listened to the clack of frozen tree branches whipping in the frigid January wind and then watched the branches redden with life in the first warming days of March. I've squinted while driving slowly, oh so slowly, in thick night fog.

I've hiked on parkway trails in just about every month, down to splashy cool waterfalls in the summer and within whirling snowflakes in the winter. The best tangerine I ever ate was on top of Rough Ridge at dawn. As my husband and I peeled our breakfast treat, we saw a thin glow, like a red-hot wire, in the black sky. At first slowly, and then suddenly, the clouds broke open to reveal every shade of red, gold, orange and crimson as the finger-laced mountains assumed their familiar blue hue.

I've watched a good many sunsets from a good many overlooks in these 30-plus years, and now, because the statute of limitations has surely expired against wayward college students, I can confess that, while a student at Appalachian State University, I cut a few too many Friday afternoon classes to escape the confining classroom walls to luxuriate in beauty I found in the mountains and on the parkway.

*The view from the seat and by the seat. Long-time parkway and hiking enthusiast Lynn Setzer characterizes the photo above, with husband Randall Washington, as "two antiques standing next to an antique."*

So, you see, I thought I knew the parkway, with its many moods and feelings.

But I was wrong. One fine, if damp, fall morning, I discovered a new side of the parkway.

My husband and I had towed his antique 1976 Honda Goldwing to Asheville. Now nearing antique status ourselves and living in the flatlands, we had dreamed of cruising along our favorite road. Finally, our day had arrived.

Pulling out of the lot at the Folk Art Center early that Sunday, we reveled in the full sensory delights of the ride: the purr of the Goldwing, the sunlight filtering between tree leaves in cathedral tunnels, deep purple and golden yellow flowers lining our way, the mysterious wafting of clouds on bended knee deep below in the valleys, watching the asphalt diamonds sparkle beneath our feet as we hugged the curves and became one with them.

We could smell the green wetness left by earlier rain, smell grass and corn and, curiously, toast, as we motored up to Craggy Gardens. We listened to the wind change its tune as we leaned close to rock walls, and we marveled at rusts, grays and browns of their surfaces. We saw for the first time how sharp the wood grain appeared in the occasional guardrail, and as we pulled into an overlook, we spied overhead a red-tailed hawk landing, talons outstretched into a tree. I felt a fleeting kinship with the mighty bird.

Higher and higher we climbed, and as we neared Craggy Gardens, I realized that the cold massage of wind in my face had made me yearn for a bowl of steaming vegetable soup and a big square of cornbread – you know, real food.

Because clouds hung low and rain threatened our jaunt, we retraced our journey to the Folk Art Center. Quietly loading the Goldwing for its long ride home, unwilling to mar the afterglow of our maiden voyage, we paused and said to each other, "we need to do this again, real soon."

You see, we thought we knew the parkway. Obviously we have much, much more to learn. 🍂