

FIRST WORD

BY REED L. ENGLE

Driving Adventure

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, SUNDAY AFTERNOONS WERE FOR DRIVING. The lean years of World War II were over. Young families with new, or almost new, automobiles took advantage of the “day of rest” (there were Blue Laws, and most stores were closed on Sundays) to take a drive in the country. And if you lived in the country, your parents called on friends whom they might not have seen since the previous Sunday.

SUNDAY DRIVES WERE ADVENTURES, with the ever-present possibility of danger. In summer, families traveling two-lane roads with names a century old often ended up in traffic jams because radiators boiled over regularly. Car owners carried patching kits because tires had tubes and often went flat. Automobile air conditioning was unknown, and most vehicles had no radios. Travelers talked and played games. **FAMILY VACATIONS WERE NOW DEPENDENT ON** the automobile, and the trip itself became as important as the destination. Sightseeing along the way became a major part of the vacation. In the first half of the 20th century, roadside attractions sprang up like mushrooms after rain: Wall Drugstore (South Dakota, 1931); Roadside America (Pennsylvania, 1941); South of the Border (South Carolina, 1950); and countless diversions offering motorists everything from a chance to view the “World’s Largest Ball of Twine” (Kansas, 1953) to the awe-inspiring “World’s Largest Ball of Barbed Wire” (Minnesota, 1950). Increased automobile travel generated “tourist courts” of tiny individual cabins that soon grew into more organized “motor hotels” (motels), but which still retained unique, often quirky, architectural characters—witness the national chain of concrete wigwams. The generation that came of age in the Great Depression listened to Dinah Shore and took their children to “See the USA in [Their] Chevrolet.”

IT WAS A TIME OF SIMPLE PLEASURES. No little hands held electronic games. No iPods distracted conversation. No laptop computers. No Internet. Television was still over the horizon. Movies at a theater, radio at home, and newspapers were the media. **SKYLINE DRIVE WAS DESIGNED FOR** travelers in this pre-technological America. It was planned with care for leisurely drives and picnics in the cool mountain air. It was to be both the access to a national park and a major part of the park experience. It was to be both the “getting there” and a part of the “there.” **THE CREATION OF SKYLINE DRIVE WAS PLAGUED BY THE SIMPLE FACT THAT** Shenandoah National Park did not exist when most of the road was being designed and built. It was a park road constructed without a park. The limitations imposed on the initial road design by the narrow right-of-way would have to be corrected once the park was established. Due to the efforts of landscape architects and engineers

hired by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps and funding provided by the Depression relief Public Works Administration, this first major National Park Service park roadway in the East became a testing ground for new architectural and landscape design standards. **SKYLINE DRIVE IS TESTIMONY TO** the values of a less pressured society. Politics, perseverance, and the privation of the Great Depression created it. Its completion was the result of the efforts of wealthy businessmen, legislators, displaced Blue Ridge Mountain residents, and the unemployed young men enrolled by the Civilian Conservation Corps. **IT STILL STANDS UP TO THE PURPOSE SET FORTH BY** the Southern Appalachian National Park Committee in its report to the Secretary of the Interior: “It will surprise the American people to learn that a national park site with fine scenic and recreational qualities can be found within a 3-hour ride of our National Capital and within a day’s ride of 40,000,000 of our inhabitants . . . The greatest single feature, however, is a possible sky-line drive along the mountain

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top, following a continuous ridge and looking down westerly on the Shenandoah Valley . . . and also commanding a view of the Piedmont Plain stretching easterly to the Washington Monument . . . Few scenic drives in the world could surpass it.” **SKYLINE DRIVE IS, HOWEVER, NOT A PARKWAY;** it is a road in a national park, a corridor through a large natural area. To many travelers the roadway represents only brilliant October foliage. But for those who take the time, or better yet another time, to visit, Skyline Drive can offer surprising glimpses of wildness: a pair of thirsty ravens drinking from a CCC-built fountain; a bobcat perched regally on a dry-laid wall; a quail strutting and challenging your right to drive on its roadway; a black bear sow and her cubs, perched on a cut slope, watching passing cars with interest. After 75 years, Skyline Drive has blended with nature to become a part of the park’s ecosystem. This roadway was created from avarice, dreams, and the sweat and tears of countless unemployed men and boys. Along this long and winding road, history and nature meld. Drive slowly and enjoy the view.

Excerpted from *The Greatest Single Feature: A Sky-Line Drive* by Reed L. Engle, thanks to the Shenandoah National Park Association. Engle, now retired from NPS, was co-winner of its Appleman-Judd-Lewis Award for excellence in cultural resource management.