

# Tour de Parkway

by George Ivey

*I'm flying downhill, and I'm warm again. Just a few minutes earlier, I was shivering at the highest point on the Blue Ridge Parkway, more than 6,000 feet up, drenched in sweat after the climbs from Asheville to Pisgah to Graveyard Fields and finally to Richland Balsam. The road has dried from the recent storm. The wind has blown itself out. It's a perfect time and place to be on a bicycle.*

*But if I've learned one thing about the parkway, I know it's going to change again real soon. And as I round a bend, the road gives me another tunnel. I quickly turn on my headlight and flashing red taillight, but they are no match for the sudden plunge from bright sun to darkness. This tunnel is long and curving, blocking the proverbial light at the other end. My eyes can't adjust quickly enough, so I only see black. I lose any clear sense of up and down and left and right. For all I know, my eyes might even be closed. I hit rough pavement. Have I crossed the yellow lines? Am I approaching the side of the tunnel on my right? I stiffen my tired arms to keep the handlebars steady and hope that a thin glow of light will appear somewhere up ahead.*

## Because It's There

Why do people climb Mount Everest? Why do they hike the entire Appalachian Trail? Why would you try to ride all 469 miles of the Blue Ridge Parkway on a bicycle in eight days or less?

Perhaps you like a challenge and the sense of accomplishment that comes from going beyond your perceived limits. Maybe you've seen a part of the parkway and feel some need to experience the rest of it. Or you've seen the Tour de France and wondered what it's like to spend five hours in the saddle, day after day, riding some of the hilliest terrain around. Or you want to prove that you aren't getting too old, at least not yet. Or you simply want to do something different just to get away from the ordinary. Any one of these reasons would do. For me, it was a little of each.

But it ended up being a lot more than that, too.

## Day One

After six months of training and six hours of driving up from my Western North Carolina home, I have reached Rockfish Gap, the northern end of the Blue Ridge Parkway. My parents have decided to come with me, though they will stick to the car and occasional hiking while I am out cycling. We unload the bike, and I change into my cycling clothes. A friend has come to see me off. It's already past three and dark clouds are approaching from the northwest. If I'm going to tackle the first 46 miles before the day is out, I have to get going. I wish for more time, but I don't have it. After a few pictures to mark the moment, I get on the bike and start my way south.

It feels great to get rolling. The road is smooth, and a tailwind pushes me along. Then I hit the first hill. Not a big one, just a preview of what's to come. Near Milepost 6, I breeze by Humpback Rocks Visitor Center. I look at the interpretive exhibits at 20 miles an hour, and then

see the first prominent hemlock tree – dead. Another sign of what’s to come. The exotic and lethal hemlock woolly adelgid has been here for years, and it shows.

As I head slowly up the next hill, I have plenty of time to see the fine details of the landscape beyond the road – each tree, each rock, each section of fence, each blade of grass. I see squirrels hopping through the woods, hear the birds singing, and watch groundhogs scurrying away as I approach. When I go downhill, though, all these particulars are just a blur.

I climb up toward Whetstone Ridge and look down on the upper reaches of the Tye River. Hemlocks tower above the creek bottoms; they are all gray, all dead. As the forest closes in around the road again, I notice young hemlocks in the understory, too – either dying or dead. Travelling in a car at 45 miles an hour, you wouldn’t notice that, and maybe that’s okay. Better to see the general beauty and enjoy it, than to notice the finer details of what is going wrong.

Down again, up again, down again, and up again. The uphill starts so abruptly after each descent that more than once I check my tires to see if they have suddenly gone flat. How else could I slow down so quickly?

I spot a section of re-constructed railroad on the left, just a stone’s throw from the parkway. Through the trees I also see a waterfall. I’m tempted to stop, but I can’t really walk very far in my cleated cycling shoes. I know I’m missing something, but I keep going. I still have ten miles to ride. Again, I wish for more time. That’s twice I’ve felt that way, and I’m only on the first day.

My parents are waiting for me at Humphries Gap, where we will break from the parkway for an overnight in Lexington. I’m feeling very good. Just 423 more miles to go.

## **Day Two**

A cold front has moved through. It’s sunny and cooler, less humid. A short climb warms me up at the start. Then I begin a long descent, crisscrossing Otter Creek several times before reaching the James River, the lowest point on the parkway at 649 feet.

As I go over the long bridge, I slow down to look upriver and down and take in the stunning views. But I’m already thinking about the climb ahead to the top of Apple Orchard Mountain, one of the toughest stretches on the entire parkway – 3,300 feet of climbing in just 13.5 miles. I want to spend more time at the river, but I know I must go on.

With such a full schedule of cycling each day, I have already resigned myself to making a list of places to come back to. It started with Humpback Rocks. It grew with the reconstructed railroad and the waterfall. Now I add the James.

I leave the river behind me, shift to an easier gear and begin the climb, eager to see each milepost just to prove that I’m actually making some progress.

Even in the smaller gears, it’s still a hard ride, but I enjoy the struggle up the mountain. There’s something purifying about all-out exertion. As the sweat drips away, so do my cares, my frustrations, and my worries. Finally, it’s just me and the mountain.

And the damn motorcycles! There must be at least two of them for every car or truck that travels the parkway, maybe more. Some are so quiet they surprise me, but too many are shatter-the-eardrums loud. So I find myself out on a bicycle in the middle of perfect nowhere, wishing for earplugs.

The noise slowly moves up the road, and peace returns. All I hear is my breathing and the sound of my tires rolling over the pavement. The climb seems endless. I pass by an overlook that provides spectacular views of other mountain ranges to the west. People who have stopped there turn and watch me as I continue uphill. They don't wave at first; I'm apparently more of a novelty item. I nod to acknowledge them, and they nod back and smile in a puzzled way, obviously baffled by the idea of climbing such a mountain without a motor.

I finally reach the top of Apple Orchard Mountain. I celebrate by eating a banana, then start the nine-mile descent to the Peaks of Otter area. I stop there and wait for my parents to catch up. I eat and drink and refill my water bottles while they fill me in on their morning diversions. Soon I pedal away again, eager to get in a few more miles before I call it a day.

I stop at Black Horse Gap near Milepost 98. "Only" 371 miles still to go. We backtrack to Peaks of Otter Lodge, one of just three hotels located right on the parkway. It's a beautiful spot on a small lake. I shower, wash my dirty cycling clothes, and then sit outside my room, looking up at Sharp Top Mountain. It's one more place I'll have to come back to. After cycling 52 miles that day, it's just too much to think about hiking all the way to the summit.

It's Father's Day, so I treat Dad (and Mom) to dinner at the lodge. We compare notes on our different journeys. There are common themes and differences, but this part of the parkway is new to all of us, and overall, we love what we see.

Unfortunately, we also notice how the parkway lacks adequate resources to keep up with the demands placed upon it. Mom walked the "Trail of Trees" at the James River and saw the featured hemlock tree, which is dead. She continued on to find the rhododendron entirely missing from behind its nameplate. For me, the parkway shows its wear and tear in the road itself, with cracks and potholes big enough to grab my thin bicycle tires and never let them go. After dinner, we walk down to Polly Wood's Ordinary, a historic 1800s inn that looks great on the outside, but pitiful within. The parkway gives us so much; it deserves more in return.

We walk back to our rooms, losing count of all the deer that have come out at day's end. I'm tired, but happy. All in all, all is well.

### **Day Three**

It's the first day of summer, the longest day of the year. We return to Black Horse Gap to start the day's ride. I have 76.5 miles ahead of me, beginning with ten miles of downhill and another ten miles of flat. The flat represents the outskirts of Roanoke, the first somewhat urban interface on the parkway. It's a weekday. The traffic is heavier here, and it moves a lot faster (commuters, not tourists). The road is cracked and worn from all the vehicle weight. There are cookie-cutter subdivisions within view, developments that have made little or no effort to blend

in with the parkway's bucolic character. When the road finally pitches up again, I'm glad to put Roanoke behind me.

As I continue higher, the bright sun of the day before is slowly giving way to a thick haze. By Adney Gap, farm and forest alternate along the roadsides, and the haze has coalesced into clouds. It's cooler and darker. A few miles later, the clouds drift down to meet the parkway, and I ride along in a light fog. I meet up with my parents to get more food and water, as well as my headlight, brake light, and bright yellow vest. I don't want to stop my ride just because of some fog, but I don't want to be hit by a car either.

As it turns out, I have little to worry about. I go for several miles without seeing anyone else in either direction. The fog thickens some, and the world beyond disappears. I ride the gentle ups and downs of the rolling hills on my own personal parkway. I scare a handful of deer that aren't expecting me. Roanoke seems much more than twenty miles away. The fog finally turns to mist, then light rain, then fog again, then clouds. I seem to have avoided the worst of the weather.

When I have ten miles left to ride, though, it starts to rain again, much harder. Within minutes, I am totally soaked. I am approaching Rocky Knob, my last climb of the day. My legs are more than tired. I press on, slowly, steadily.

I look ahead and see a doe grazing on the far side of the road. She looks up at me, then saunters out onto the pavement. Her steps are tentative. Will she stop? Will she bolt? I've seen deer run right into slow moving cars before. I fear she will dart right into my path, so I try to talk some sense into her. "You really shouldn't be out in the middle of the road," I say with an air of quiet authority, hoping beyond reason that she will understand my tone, if not my words. "What if a car comes along?" I ask. She stops, but keeps her eyes on me. We are just ten or twelve feet apart at this point. She is motionless. I struggle past her, and then look back as she finally continues across the road and slips into the woods.

The road bends to the left and reveals more of the climb. Will it ever end? I have no energy left. The rain is chilling me. My pace slows more. I finally reach the top and soon gather speed as I start downhill. The tires spray rainwater up at me, while the skies still hit me from above. It's nearly impossible to keep my eyes open to see what's ahead.

With just a mile to go, the rain lets up. My parents are waiting at an intersecting secondary road that will lead to a bed and breakfast, where we will spend the night. I have been in the saddle for nearly five and a half hours. I am unbelievably thirsty and hungry. I suck down a can of Coke and every snack available, then take a long hot shower.

Within another hour, I'm hungry again. It's very clear now that I didn't eat or drink nearly enough during the ride. I was too preoccupied with finishing up and getting out of the rain. I'm left with barely enough energy to make conversation or even to keep my eyes open. We find a pizza joint in the hip but rustic town of Floyd, and I try to re-fuel with nearly half an extra large pizza, three Sprites, and a bowl of ice cream.

Three hours later, I'm eating a midnight snack, wondering what I was thinking when I decided to ride the whole parkway. I still feel totally spent from the day's ride. My butt is sore.

My legs feel like used oil drums, heavy but empty. I don't know how I can keep riding 60, 70, 80 miles a day for four more days. I don't think it's physically possible. To make matters worse, the forecast calls for more rain. I'm full of doubt, and I'm tired enough to sleep for days.

## **Day Four**

I wake up tired and sore – and I eat again. It's cloudy, dreary, and my mood reflects the weather. We pack up and return to the parkway. Just overnight, my bike chain has begun to rust from all the water the day before. I clean it and re-lube it, look up at the gray sky, and get back on the road.

It will be a “short” day of only 67 miles and 5,300 feet of climbing – nearly flat by parkway standards. I soon pass Mabry Mill, one of the most photographed spots on the entire parkway. I coast by and add it to the list of places to return to. A few miles later, I reach Groundhog Mountain; I'll have to come back there, too. The parkway itself is a joy here, gently rolling up and down through a continuing patchwork of farmland and forest. A few modern homes and subdivisions creep into view now and then, and I do my best to ignore them. Still, I wish for more of a buffer on each side of the parkway.

The sky ahead of me is clearing. I see patches of blue. I look behind me and see white, gray, and black. I'm glad we left when we did, otherwise I might be cursing the rain again. Instead, I ride toward the sunshine.

I can't claim to be going all that fast. My legs aren't so fresh, and frankly, my underside is sore and tender. I take to coasting more and more on the downhills, just to spare myself from a few more pedal strokes. By my estimate, I've already completed 50,000 revolutions of the pedals in three and a half days. That's an awful lot of times for your body parts to rub against the saddle.

I cross into North Carolina and meet up with my parents at Cumberland Knob to re-fuel. Not long after that, I reach the climb to Doughton Park, one of the parkway's largest recreation areas. It's not too bad a mountain to climb, though. As I pass the campground area, I see another cyclist heading my way, perhaps the only other cyclist I've seen in two days. He is loaded down, carrying all his own gear as he takes the parkway north. As I lift my hand to greet him, he rings a little bell on his handlebars and shouts out a booming “HELLO!”

I finally reach Bluff's Lodge, the second of the parkway's hotel concessions. It's a beautiful spot amid flowing meadows, with a small herd of cattle and a few deer, too. It's a great place to sit back and appreciate the fact that I have reached the halfway point of my journey – and just a little more. 241 miles down, 228 to go. Of course, I did the first half in four days, and I plan to do the second half in three, but I try not to think ahead. It's been a great day – a beautiful stretch of road, great weather, no flats, no real problems at all. I saw some “new” wildlife, including a red eft and a box turtle, as well as more groundhogs. I can't imagine a finer day.

## Day Five

As I sit with my parents in the coffee shop near Bluff's Lodge, eating my pancakes and sausage and watching another batch of rain dampen the world outside, I'm thinking about the 76 miles I have to ride – as well as the 8,100 feet of climbing. It will be a tough day to say the least. The numbers don't lie.

To make matters worse, my legs are strongly suggesting that I should take a day off. It's not just my aching muscles. My knees hurt down in the bones, and my left ankle feels gimpy. It takes a lot of effort just to stand up and walk.

By the time we check out, the rain has stopped, and the road has dried a bit. The first few pedal strokes nearly kill me, but I just hope that I can pedal through the pain – or maybe become numb enough not to feel it.

I'm going even slower today. I take it easier on the uphill. I coast on almost all the downhill. The first 40 miles or so are very pleasant though – and dry.

From the increasing number of cars and their faster speed, I can tell I'm approaching another urban area. In this case, it's Boone and Blowing Rock. To make matters worse, it starts to rain again. An impatient driver tailgates me as I struggle to see my way through a fast, curving downhill section. Soaking wet, I turn off at an overlook to let him by, then continue on.

The rain lets up again. Thick green leaves block almost all sight of the homes being built next to the parkway, but I can hear the hammering. And just like that, the parkway corridor gets a bit more narrow. When I reach Moses Cone Memorial Park, I'm more than ready to rid myself of those fast cars and encroaching developments.

At this point, the parkway becomes slightly familiar. I have been on this section of the road, but not often, and never on a bicycle. Soon I am heading up the side of Grandfather Mountain. It's a steep climb, but not so bad – until a storm hits. The rain comes down at angles or nearly sideways, blown by a strong and gusting headwind. As I approach the Linn Cove Viaduct, the storm starts to clear. By the time I reach the other end of the viaduct, the air is calm and the sun is out.

I meet up with my parents at the visitor center there. Mom reports that the Rough Ridge Overlook near Milepost 303 has a great trail. I make a mental note of that, re-fuel, and change into a dry pair of cycling shorts and dry socks. The last ten miles to the town of Linville Falls are almost all downhill and sunny. It's a great way to end the day's ride.

I'm tired through and through, but my body seems to be adjusting to the strain. We find an Italian restaurant called "The Italian Restaurant," and I fuel up on pasta and feel pretty good. Maybe this parkway ride isn't such a ridiculous idea after all. 317 miles down, 152 to go.

## Day Six

Another breakfast of pancakes and sausage patties dripping with syrup, all washed down with a big glass of orange juice. I'm looking forward to a slightly shorter ride of about 71 miles

and a much better weather forecast. As I get back on the road, my parents backtrack slightly to hike to Linville Falls. I've been to the falls before, and I'd like to go again, but not today.

I struggle up to the entrance of Mount Mitchell State Park, but bypass the park itself. I've been there, too, and I've already got more feet to climb this day than if I climbed to the top of Mitchell from sea level. I think those other climbs will suffice.

I move on to Craggy Gardens and begin the long descent into Asheville. I don't see much of the fantastic views to my left, because the road itself has my full attention. It's the worst I've seen on the entire parkway – full of rough pavement and potholes. I weave my way through it all and coast nearly the whole way down to the Folk Art Center and then to the Swannanoa River.

I've dropped 3,600 feet in less than 20 miles, so I've had plenty of time to rest and recover from the big climbs earlier. It's a good thing, because the parkway traffic around Asheville reminds me more of a Nascar race. I go hard just to get these miles over with. As a teenager and amateur bicycle racer, I used to train on this stretch of the parkway at least once a week. It was more peaceful then – fewer cars, more careful drivers, lower speeds. Despite the challenges I face in relative slow motion, it's still an amazing place. I just hope it will remain so.

## **Day Seven**

I start the day with my mother's home cooking, a bonus that few parkway riders can enjoy. It's a good way to begin the day, but the skies are dark. Nearly as soon as I am ready to go, it starts to drizzle. I had seen a big blob of green moving toward Asheville on the weather radar, but I was hoping I could get in a few dry miles before it hit. Maybe at least knock out the climb to Mount Pisgah.

The rain does not let up. I'm so close to finishing my goal, but I just can't make myself do it in the rain. I decide not to ride at all, and I mope around the rest of the day, finally driving my car back to my house in Canton. I start unpacking and doing laundry, anything to stay busy. I look up at the mountains around my house and realize I made the right decision. The cloud deck is down at 3,000 feet, where I would have been riding. I would have been nearly invisible to cars moving along the parkway – until it would be too late for them to brake or swerve away from hitting me. Being dry and alive provides a little bit of consolation, but I still want to be finished. I just have to wait.

## **Day Eight**

I wake up early, fix my own breakfast, and drive back to Asheville. It's still damp and cloudy, but at least it's not raining. I'm ready to get this last ride over with, by far the toughest day I will have on the parkway: 80 miles and 10,000 feet of climbing. I roll down my parents' driveway and toward the parkway. Let the countdown begin.

It's a weekend again, and I see a handful of fellow cyclists already out on the road. I make quick progress to the French Broad River. 75 miles to go. I start the long climb to Pisgah. I have plenty of time to study the neighboring ridge, where I see large houses scattered along what I used to assume was protected land. Again, the parkway corridor gets squeezed.

Midway up the climb, the cold front is now blowing through, and I struggle to hold a straight line in the strong crosswind, which also carries with it the smell of the paper mill in Canton. My parents are waiting for me at the convenience store next to the Pisgah Inn (60 miles to go). The wind is blowing even harder and gusting, making riding more difficult – downright unpleasant! But I press on – first to Graveyard Fields (50 to go), then to Devil’s Courthouse, then to Richland Balsam – the highest point on the parkway, at just over 6,000 feet (38 to go). These landmarks are among my favorite places to hike, but I am thinking only of the Oconaluftee River at Milepost 469.

I descend nearly 3,000 feet to Balsam Gap, in the process passing all the way through that long, dark, curving tunnel, which eventually ends, with me somehow still upright on the bike. Then I climb another 2,400 feet up to Waterrock Knob (18 to go), then descend again to Soco Gap (14 to go), then climb again. It’s just like a stage in the Alps in the Tour de France. One mountain after another. A Tour de Parkway.

The last stretch is all downhill. My parents are waiting with cameras in hand to record the end of my journey. I wave nonchalantly, as if I’m *always* finishing an eight-day, 469-mile bike ride. I even continue a mile up Newfound Gap Road in Great Smoky Mountains National Park to the visitor center there, where my parents soon join me for a celebratory can of Coke. Mission accomplished.

## **Looking Back**

When people ask me about my parkway ride, I find it hard to sum it all up. It is first and foremost a road of variety – forests, sunshine, creeks, deer, heat, farms, clouds, birds, calm, rivers, fog, log cabins, rain, groundhogs, millponds, tunnels, cold, wildflowers, wind, bogs, wooden fences, scenic vistas, and of course, uphill and downhill – and a rare stretch of flat. It is a road of constant change.

Some of that change is undesirable – hemlock woolly adelgids, exotic plants, subdivisions, overuse, noise pollution, and more. The employees of the National Park Service do a great job with their limited resources. Thankfully, groups like the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, Friends of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Conservation Trust for North Carolina are lending a helping hand. After the ride, I felt compelled to make a couple donations. How could I not give back? I wish I could give more. I’ll work on that.

Most importantly, and most ironically, I’ve realized that the road itself is just a small part of the parkway experience, the means to other ends – recreation, exercise, learning, family time, history, inspiration, culture, wonder, solitude. Some of those you can’t enjoy in a car; others you can’t really access on a bike. I will have to go back to see it again from a different perspective – sometimes enclosed in a car and sometimes on two feet.

And I will go back on two wheels, too. Maybe not the whole thing all at once again, but I know I can’t stay away from it for long.