

BLUE RIDGE ROAD RALLY



Twisting and turning through the North Carolina high country

text and photography by Thomas and Kelly Glatch

“Looking south from the Mt. Pisgah Inn, what peak has the highest elevation and what is it?”

“What year was Sherrell’s Inn built?”

“In what year did the Hendersonville women’s basketball team win their state championship?”



No, we were not playing *Trivial Pursuit*. Instead, we were competing in the first annual Grand Road Rally, an event run by the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina. For 125 miles we twisted and turned through the Blue Ridge Mountains surrounding Asheville, looking for clues to questions and enjoying the magnificent beauty. This is a fun event, with minimum competition and maximum enjoyment. And for first-time visitors like ourselves, the Grand Road Rally proved to be the perfect introduction to the splendor of North Carolina’s mountain country.

The Grand Road Rally was a Memorial Day weekend package that included two nights at the Grove Park Inn, beginning on Friday afternoon with a walking tour of the inn’s historic main building. Friday evening we joined the other participants for a reception, with a briefing on the rules of the rally. Bill Kelley, the Grove Park Inn’s director of security and grand marshal of the rally, passed around a large hand-bound book dating from 1918. That was the year that four giants of American history — inventor Thomas Edison, automaker Henry Ford, tire baron Harvey Firestone and botanist William Burroughs — spent

a summer traveling by automobile from Pittsburgh south through Virginia and West Virginia, stopping where they pleased for as long as they wanted for some sightseeing and recreation. The southernmost point on their journey was Asheville, where they stayed in the luxury of the Grove Park Inn. The story of their wandering summer trip, printed in this book donated by the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company, was Bill Kelley's inspiration for the Grand Road Rally.

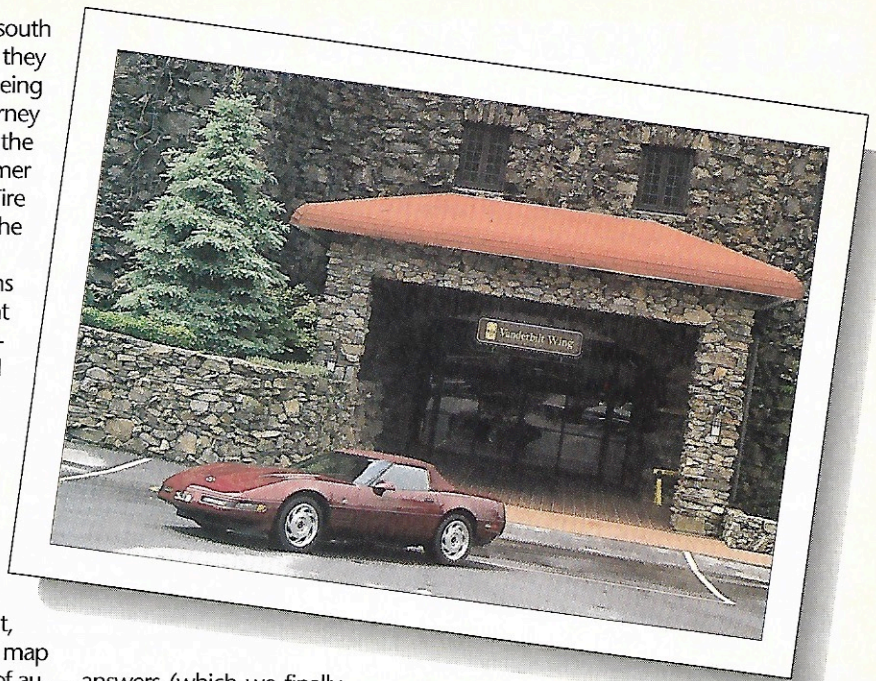
It was during the reception that starting positions were drawn. The 12 participants in this new event would start at 10-minute intervals. Come 9 o'clock Saturday morning, by the luck of the draw, your intrepid *Corvette Fever* reporters would start in position number one.

In typical mountain country fashion, the morning dawned cool and hazy. After breakfast with the other participants in one of the inn's grand ballrooms, we were given a "survival kit" packed with snacks and first aid supplies. We also received a wicker picnic basket for our lunch stop along the route. Finally, we were issued our first instruction sheet, and, should we have gotten hopelessly lost, a survival map to get us back. Since speed was not a factor, the type of automobile used in the rally did not matter. Our 12 competitors ranged from a Jeep Grand Cherokee to a Volvo. Even a classic 1965 Morgan +4 competed, driven by Roger Chipman of nearby Skyland. But there were Corvettes too, with Jack and Barbara McEwen of Asheville bringing their pretty '62. Then there were Bruno and Debbie Salvator, who drove 14 hours in their '91 coupe from New Jersey to celebrate their 15th wedding anniversary by participating in the Grand Road Rally. We from *Corvette Fever* went in style, driving a 1993 40th Anniversary Corvette roadster on loan from Chevrolet's Atlanta zone office.

The beginning of our first set of instructions took us north and east of Asheville on the Elk Mountain Scenic Highway, which took us on loose gravel and tight switch-backs high into the mountains. Our first scenic stop was Buzzard Rock, a cliff from which hang-gliders leap into the wild blue yonder. Time was not a big factor on the rally, since the times of all participants were averaged, with the team coming closest to the average earning 100 points. We stopped for a few minutes just to stand in awe of the scene.

A few more miles up the Elk Mountain Scenic Highway (8.7 miles into the rally) we junctioned at the famous Blue Ridge Parkway. Spanning 470 miles from the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park on the Tennessee/North Carolina border, the two-lane Blue Ridge Parkway winds at 45 mph through some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. We traveled south on the parkway 6.6 miles to the Folk Art Center.

The Folk Art Center was established in the 1930s to perpetuate the indigenous mountain arts, crafts and music. Until recent years, these mountains were cut off from much of the rest of the world, and the inhabitants developed their own unique artistic traditions. We could have spent hours at the center, but instead we had 20 minutes to find the answers to two questions on the instruction sheet. After pestering the center's staff and searching high and low for the



answers (which we finally found) we switched driving and navigating chores and continued south on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

At mile 26.9 of the rally we made our next scenic stop, the French Broad Overlook high above the French Broad River. More questions, more clues. We continued south on the Blue Ridge Parkway, passing through 10 tunnels (we had to record some of their elevations). Finding the clues to each question along the route was important, as one point was awarded for each correct answer. We noticed the temperature dropping steadily until we reached the Mt. Pisgah Inn, mile 41.6 on the rally, elevation 5,000 feet. This was a good place to fuel up the Corvette (we were averaging 19.3 mpg so far) and dip into the "survival kit" for a snack. We also had to search for the name and elevation of the

highest peak looking south.

Leaving the Mt. Pisgah Inn we headed south on the parkway four miles, turning on to U.S. 276. We were now going downhill, winding through beautiful Looking Glass Creek valley. One stop along the way was Sliding Rock, a spot along the river where youngsters slide down the rocks on their bottoms on a thin sheet of water. We also paused downstream at the beauty of Looking Glass Falls before pulling into the Coon Tree Picnic Area, our first checkpoint and our lunch break. We had covered 55.3 miles in about three hours, answered 21 questions along the route (correctly, we hoped), and were thoroughly amazed by the splendor of the mountains.

Our picnic basket was packed with smoked salmon, roast beef, chicken, an assortment of cheeses and fresh fruit, plus sparkling water and apple cider. The wicker basket also contained glass plates and goblets, real silverware and cloth napkins, all of which was ours to keep. As usual, the Grove Park Inn staff thought of everything.

After a 45-minute lunch break we received our next set of instructions. The route took us back to civilization, through Hendersonville and the apple-growing country east of it. At 88.8 miles into the rally we crossed the Eastern

...the Grand Road Rally proved to be the perfect introduction to the splendor of North Carolina's mountain country.

Asheville At A Glance

Population	46,000
Elevation	2,134 ft.
Time Zone	Eastern

Average Temperature:

Spring	55 degrees
Summer	72 degrees
Autumn	57 degrees
Winter	39 degrees

BLUE RIDGE ROAD RALLY

Continental Divide and four miles later entered the famed Hickory Nut Gorge.

Anyone who has seen the spectacular scenery in the movie *The Last of the Mohicans* will know Hickory Nut Gorge. In fact, the gorge has been the site of a number of Hollywood productions, beginning with *Conquest of Canaan*, *In The Heart of The Blue Ridge*, and *The Battle Cry*, filmed in the silent era, and most recently with *Being There*, *Bull Durham* and *Dirty Dancing*. Our route took us down Highway 74 past the famed Chimney Rock and the 404-foot Hickory Nut Falls to the Lake Lure Inn, our next checkpoint. We had covered 97.6 miles, with one more leg left on the journey.

We backtracked five miles on Highways 64 and 74 before our route took us on 74 north toward Asheville. We still had questions to answer as we wound down the mountain, passing the historic site of Sherrill's Inn and going through the town of Fairview. Finally we were on I-240, the only interstate on the rally, entering Asheville and returning to the finish line at the Grove Park Inn. We finished the first annual Grand Road Rally, covering 125 miles in six hours and six minutes. And we had the most enjoyable 125 miles imaginable in an automobile.

At the awards dance later that evening we learned that we were not one of the top four finishers. Those lucky and talented winners received complimentary weekend packages at the Grove Park Inn, cash prizes and plaques. The rest of us who finished "out of the money" still received a video of the historic inn. Best of all, we had the memories of a truly wonderful day.

We stayed two more nights at the Grove Park Inn during our extended weekend. Built in 1913 on Sunset Mountain, the Grove Park Inn is one of the world's finest resorts, rated "Five Diamonds" by the AAA and "Four Stars" by Mobil. There are 510 rooms, six restaurants with wonderful views, two swimming pools, tennis, golf, weight rooms and the list goes on.

Staying at the inn is a bit like being on an ocean liner, without the ocean. But there's more to the Grove Park Inn than luxury; there is a powerful sense of history, born by the many famous visitors that have stayed here. Nearly every president since Woodrow Wilson has been here. So has F. Scott Fitzgerald, who stayed in rooms 441 and 443 while his wife, Zelda, was in a nearby sanitarium. A night at the Grove Park Inn is a chance to rub shoulders with the spirits of Will Rogers, Enrico Caruso, John D. Rockefeller Jr. and the dozens of other famous guests of the inn.

We would have been perfectly content just enjoying the luxury of the inn, but instead spent some of our remaining time exploring the sights of the area, including Connemara, the retirement home and farm of poet Carl Sandburg. We also spent an afternoon at Biltmore, George Vanderbilt's breathtaking 255-room summer home. Built between 1890 and 1895 on an 8,000-acre site, Biltmore is a self-sustaining museum, with a restaurant, farm and winery as part of the complex.

One final night was spent in the company of newfound friends Jack and Barbara McEwan, the owners of the '62 Corvette. They graciously put us up in their beautiful Victorian bed-and-breakfast inn, Cedar Crest, just a few blocks from the entrance to Biltmore. Built in 1891 by a wealthy Asheville man, Cedar

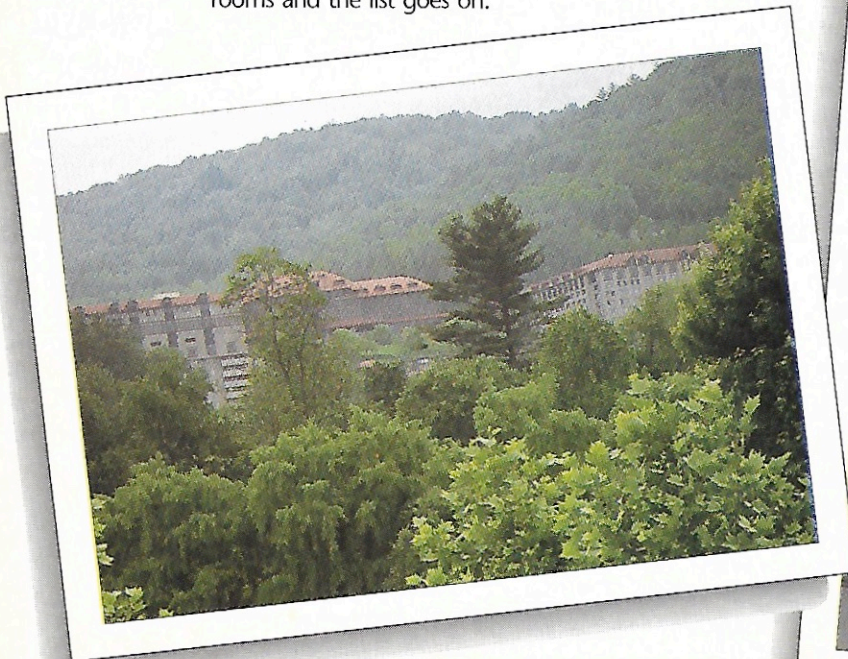
Crest features the finest woodwork and antique furnishings in town this side of Biltmore. You cannot spend the night in the Vanderbilt home, but Cedar Crest is the next best thing.

Asheville, North Carolina, is consistently voted as one of the finest places in America to visit, or to live in. Our extended holiday weekend was filled with the beauty of the mountains, the luxury and service of the Grove Park Inn, the wonder of Biltmore, and the history and charm of Asheville and the surrounding area. It's the perfect place for a Grand Road Rally, or a grand Corvette adventure all your own.

Grove Park Inn Special Events

Throughout the year the Grove Park Inn hosts a number of special events. While the date on the next Grand Road Rally has not been set as of this writing, the inn has other event packages scheduled. Call the inn for further information at 800-438-5800.

Asheville... is consistently voted as one of the finest places in America to visit... the perfect place for a Grand Road Rally, or a grand Corvette adventure all your own.



Blue Ridge Area Traveler's Guide

Recommended Accommodations

Resort

The Grove Park Inn and Country Club
290 Macon Avenue
Asheville, NC 28804
704-252-2711
800-438-5800

Bed And Breakfast

Cedar Crest, A Victorian Inn
674 Biltmore Avenue
Asheville, NC 28803
704-252-1389

Arts And Crafts

Folk Art Center
Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 382
P.O. Box 9545
Asheville, NC 28815
704-298-7928

Biltmore Homespun Shops
Groveswood Road (across from Grove Park Inn)
Asheville, NC 28804
704-253-7651

Historical Sites

Biltmore Estate
Interstate 40 at Exit 50
(for info) One North Pack Square
Asheville, NC 28801
800-543-2961
704-255-1700

Thomas Wolfe Memorial
48 Spruce Street
Asheville, NC 48801
704-253-8304

Connemara
Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site
Flat Rock, NC 28731

Information

Visit North Carolina
Raleigh, NC 27699
800-VISIT-NC

Asheville Travel and Tourism Office
P.O. Box 1010
Asheville, NC 28802
704-258-6109
800-548-1300 (in NC)
800-257-1200 (outside NC)

Blue Ridge Parkway
200 BB&T Bldg.
Asheville, NC 28801
704-259-0701

CF