

## **History of Cherohala Skyway**

Portions of ancient Cherokee trading routes underlie the roadbed of spectacular and panoramic Cherohala Skyway. Since these lands were first inhabited there has been a desire to bridge the “Over the Hills Mountains”, the “White Smoky” or “Enemy Mountains”. The Cherokee Indians and early settlers had a desire to establish a route from the town of Tellico Plains, TN to the area near Robbinsville, NC. In addition, to the territories lying beyond. This is the location of the Cherohala Skyway, which was finally completed in 1996 after almost thirty-five years of planning, negotiation and construction.

In 1958 at a Tellico Plains, TN Kiwanis meeting the idea of a wagon train first came to bear. They were discussing the ongoing need for a connecting highway between the two states over the mountains. Sam Williams made a suggestion of the wagon train since they only had wagon roads. After considering the idea, they organized the first departure set for 6:00 a.m. July 4, 1958 from TN to NC state line and they arrived in Murphy NC 12 hours later. The first wagon train had 67 covered wagons and 325 horseback riders. The wagon train continued on same route for many years later. This brought much-needed media attention including television coverage as well as newspapers and magazines.

Financial support was sought from Federal Lands Highway Fund. When it was decided to seek Federal money the wagon train turned its attention away from Murphy NC as being the destination of the road to other possible routes because Federal monies could only be spent on Federal land so the focus of destination was shifted to Robbinsville since most of the road could be built on Forest Service land. The US Forest Service was receptive therefore provided plans and a suggested route.

In the late 1950's, the legislatures of TN and NC endorsed the construction of a road that would open up development of recreation areas in the Southern Appalachian region. Economic development committees from Monroe County, TN, and Graham County, NC area began actively promoting the wagon train.

In the early 1960's, Senators Kefauver, Gore, Ervin and Jordan enthusiastically supported a proposal to improve the east-west travel route to stimulate the area's economy. In 1962 under the Federal Highway Act, the public lands highway, that would eventually become the Cherohala Skyway, was authorized. In October of 1962, Senator Estes Kefauver sent a telegram to Charles Hall Mayor of Tellico Plains that Federal funds had been approved with a projected cost of 6 million. In the end, the Cherohala Skyway cost over one-hundred million dollars.

Design and **survey** got underway in spring of 1963. First monies made available July 1, 1963 and two years later, the Federal Highway Administration awarded the first construction contract to start work on the NC side of the highway. By 1969, 7.2 miles of the road had been completed on the TN side.

## **Opposition**

Construction of the Skyway had been controversial from the very beginning. The original route in NC was planned to skirt the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. A strong public lobby opposed this part of the roadway and planning for the alternative “Santeetlah **Crest Route**” was begun in 1977. Design approval for the “Santeetlah Creek **Route**” was received in June 1982. Environmentalists kept the project at a halt in NC from 1968 to 1983. They overcame the opposition by agreeing to a new route in NC from Santeetlah Gap to Beech Gap, this would allow the Skyway not to go split Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest.

In 1977, Tennessee had a setback; an acid leak was discovered from a rock formation of fill material. Natural formations of Anakeesta rock exposed by road excavation and used as fill material were leaching acid downstream into the watershed. Experts realized that this naturally occurring acid leaching phenomena would cause considerable damage to trout fishing and water quality. A contract for implementing remedial measures to counteract the acid problem was awarded in July 1978. Further studies were taken to avoid the same problem on the remaining uncompleted sections of the road.

## **Completion of Cherohala Skyway**

The long awaited Cherohala Skyway was completed as a 45-mile stretch starting from Tellico Plains, TN and ending in Robbinsville, NC and dedicated in 1996 as a National Scenic Byway. From 38 years of conception idea in Tellico Plains to finish it was a much-anticipated day for many people that worked so diligently on this project. This was a well-deserved recognition because it is truly a wonder and a marvel to drive up to over 5,000-foot elevation and view the magnificent scenery that rivals any drive in the entire United States of America. Cherohala Skyway got its name from the two National Forests it runs through **CHERO** coming from Cherokee National Forest and **HALA** coming from Nantahala National Forest

## **Partners**

Senator Estes Kefauver (TN), Senator Albert Gore (TN), Senator Everett Jordan (NC), Senator Carl Hayden (AZ), and Senator Robert Kerr (OK)  
Late Congressman John Duncan Sr. (TN), Congressman John Duncan Jr. (TN)  
Monroe County, TN Mayor J. Allan Watson

Monroe County, TN Board of County Commissioners  
State Representative Robert Mckee  
Graham Co. NC officials  
USFS  
Charles Hall, prior Tellico Plains, TN Mayor for 30 years  
In addition, many more people very instrumental in this project

### **Tourism/Economic Development**

This project has benefited the local community and region by generating income and employment for locals. It has given way for entrepreneurs to open craft stores, art galleries, fishing service guides, outfitters, campgrounds, restaurants, small hometown eateries, gas service stations and lodging facilities.

There is a growing interest in tourism in Southeast TN and Western NC. The area is rich in scenic beauty, and natural and historic resources. Other industries, such as mining and timber are diminishing. Quality oriented tourism can produce many economic benefits for local businesses. One of the objectives for the Cherohala Skyway is to establish new partners and cooperators for compatible recreation-support facilities and information near the Skyway corridor. The Monroe County Dept. of Tourism and Monroe County Dept. of Economic Development will encourage development and marketing of new facilities near the Skyway corridor to meet the needs of the traveling public.

### **Social Setting**

Recreation in the vicinity of the Skyway is heaviest along the Tellico River. The greater capacity for use along the Skyway should be the primary focus for channeling visitors into the Forests from the TN and NC sides. The Tellico River is heavily impacted on weekends in spring, summer, and fall. Recreation is also popular along the lower section of the Skyway, up to the Indian Boundary Recreation Area. The Skyway is the primary conduit for channeling visitors into the Forest. The Skyway serves a wide market area and extensive population.

### **Natural Features**

There are many spectacular geological features along the Skyway. Visitors enjoy viewing the massive boulders, sheer rock cliffs, striking prominences and layered stratas of rock that majestically shelter the road. Below the Southern Appalachian Mountains, there is a fascinating history of geologic upheaval. Over millions of years, tremendous pressures have formed rocks and minerals while oceans have deposited sediments. Winds

and waters have eroded and etched the surfaces to form the fabric of these mountain faces while giving them soft edges and horizon lines. The area is famous for its rivers, waterfalls, lakes, mountains, and picturesque valleys. Cherokee National Forest is home to many waterfalls, the most fascinating one is Bald River Falls a 100 FT cascading water fall that is magical to view. The brave at heart take the challenge and kayak over it.

## **Interpretation**

Interpretive materials are available along the Skyway for the visitors. The Cherohala Skyway and Cherohala Skyway Visitor Center provide interpretive facilities, materials and signage for the visitor to enjoy in a beautiful and historic setting. The Skyway is a major corridor for access into the heart of the historic Cherokee Indian Nation. The major objective of the interpretive program for the Cherohala Skyway is to tell the story of the natural resources and cultural heritage of the Southern Appalachian region.

## **Cherohala Skyway Facility Standards**

The objectives for all amenities built along the corridor of the Skyway are dual: to hold the modifications to a minimum, and to carefully design facilities so they appear to be a part of the natural setting. The Skyway has adopted a consistent family of signs for the corridor that compliment the existing walls and facilities. The goal is to provide easily understood directional information with a minimum of visual distraction. All structures Along the Skyway is constructed using the same massive stone as the existing overlook walls. The existing stonework at overlooks achieves the “feeling of permanence” that National Forest structures should emulate. Restroom facilities, picnic facilities, trailhead markers, along with interpretive signs telling history make the visitor enjoy an authentic experience along the Skyway.

## **Prior Grants Received**

- 1999 – Cherohala Skyway \$28,000.
- 2001 – Implement Cherohala Skyway Corridor Mgmt. plan \$25,000
- 2001 – Cherohala Skyway Visitor Center Facility in Tellico Plains \$683,600.
- 2004 – Implementation Corridor Mgmt. plan \$25,000.
- 2006 – Visitor Safety Program \$44,320.
- 2006 – Cherohala Skyway Corridor Mgmt. plan \$24,150.
- 2007 – Corridor Mgmt. Plan implementation yr. 3 \$24,150.

Monroe County Government and Monroe County Department of Tourism have administered these grants. They have been of utmost value and importance in accomplishing and progressing forward the marketing of the Cherohala Skyway National

Scenic Byway. The Cherohala Skyway Visitor Center was completed and dedicated in 2003 and is a landmark in Tellico Plains and an exceptionally warm, welcoming facility for the byway traveler to stop in at and get local, as well as regional information. Last year TDOT had a count that 1.25 million people traveled the Cherohala Skyway. The visitor center serves as a primary tool in many ways to market the skyway. With the seed grants received Monroe County has developed a state-of-the-art website [www.cherohala.org](http://www.cherohala.org) that has been praised by the National Scenic Byway headquarters. With grant money, it has allowed Monroe County Department of Tourism to attend trade shows to market and promote tourism to the byway as well as the entire county. The Seed Grant has provided us to have printed 16 x 20 tear off detailed shaded topography maps of the Cherohala Skyway on one side as well as the backside a regional map for the tourist.

## **Overview**

The Cherohala Skyway is sustaining tourism by attempting to make a low impact on the natural environment and local culture, while helping to generate income and employment for locals, as well as to promote the conservation of local ecosystems. The Cherohala Skyway contributes a unique opportunity to experience and learn about our cultural heritage in one of the most spectacular forest environments in the world. In it's entirety it is a National Scenic Byway that Monroe County is very honored to showcase to the world.

## **Vision**

***“The reason I have such confidence in the potential economic and recreational benefits of the proposed road is that it would provide access into the largest area of National Forests east of the Mississippi, an area that is largely undeveloped, inaccessible, and unvisited by America’s tourists, campers, and outdoor recreation seekers.”***

***Senator Estes Kefauver, Tennessee, August 7, 1962***

***Everyone’s vision, hardwork, and dedication became a reality in 1996.***