



# Grandfather Mountain

Pivot Point of the Blue Ridge Parkway

Photography and text by Randy Johnson

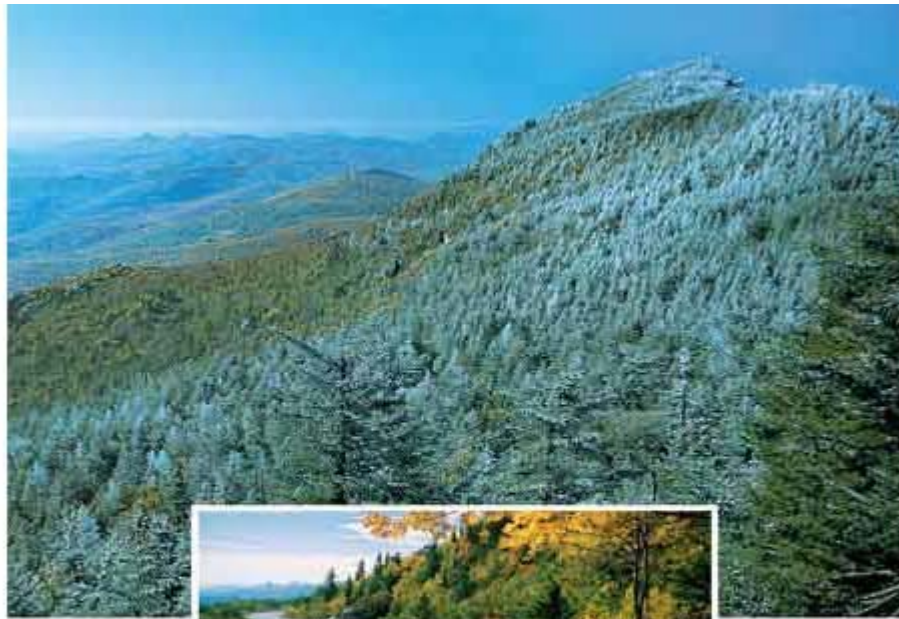


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**An international icon of the "scenic drive" and the most visited unit of the National Park system, the Blue Ridge Parkway is considered by many travel writers to be America's most scenic road. And yet, on its 50th anniversary in 1985, the Parkway remained incomplete.**

The missing link

The story of how the last, unfinished section of the Blue Ridge Parkway was finished – the "missing link" around North Carolina's Grandfather Mountain – is a nationally significant tale of environmental preservation. It's a personal story as well, one that brought me into contact with Hugh Morton, the man who owned Grandfather Mountain and who is now one of the nation's elder environmental statesmen.

I had discovered Grandfather Mountain in the 1970s while searching for the South's coldest, snowiest site. I was fascinated by the mountain's remarkable wilds. It was one of the backcountry's best-kept secrets.

Like countless visitors then and since, I paid to drive up the road to Hugh Morton's mountaintop. But instead of crossing the Mile High Swinging Bridge, the swaying suspension bridge of postcard fame, I hiked the alpine crest of the peak on the Grandfather Trail, the romantically dubbed "Trail of Thirteen Ladders" where wooden rungs help hikers up sheer cliffs. The view led early Appalachian explorer Andre Michaux to exclaim that he'd climbed "the highest mountain in all North America."

On a return visit in 1977, I encountered "No Trespassing" signs and a security guard elsewhere on the mountain. Hiking was being discouraged because a hiker had died from hypothermia. The trails were overgrown. I decided to do something about the problem. Luckily, when I went to see Hugh Morton, the man I met was much more than the owner of just another roadside tourist attraction.

## Hugh Morton and his mountain

Hugh Morton had returned to his family's lands on Grandfather Mountain after World War II, a decorated and wounded combat photographer. Over the years, Morton's promotional genius and his gift for scenic photography made the mountain a high point of North Carolina tourism. For example, the mountain had been a private tourist attraction since the 1930s, but Morton expanded the "summit road" and built the suspension bridge and gift shop between two rocky peaks. He added a long list of annual events that attracted thousands of visitors. In 1973, he



Photo by Randy Johnson, ©2004

Photographer Hugh Morton's stewardship has helped preserve Grandfather Mountain.

started opening habitat-style animal exhibits, including those for deer, bears, cougars, eagles and otters.



Grandfather Mountain is the scenic epitome of the Southern Appalachians in North Carolina.

However, there's something about "owning a mountain," especially one developed to attract tourists, that rubs people the wrong way. Back in the early 1950s, public-spirited people lobbied to remove Grandfather Mountain from private ownership. A plan devised by the National Park Service to complete the Blue Ridge Parkway on a "high route" along the mountain's flank was probably intended to wrest control of the mountain from Morton and undermine the appeal of his Swinging Bridge.

But Morton marshaled public opinion against the high route that would have destroyed a significant swath of the mountain's wilderness. The irony of a private landowner defending trees against the nation's principal conservation agency was not lost on the public.

For 30 years the Department of the Interior wrangled with the private landowner over where the Blue Ridge Parkway would cross "his" mountain. In the late 1970s, Parkway planners and Hugh Morton finally agreed on how the Parkway would pass this magnificent summit without destroying its spectacular wilderness by taking a lower route. Morton then donated the land for the road.

The National Park Service forged ahead, sparing no expense to minimize the environmental impact on the mountain. Luckily, Morton had delayed the Parkway long enough that computers could be used to design a span lifting the road above fragile portions of the mountainside. The soaring, S-shaped Linn Cove Viaduct is today a stunning part of the Parkway drive.



Photo by Randy Johnson, ©2004

The heritage of Appalachia is never far from the Blue Ridge Parkway.

## In support of the environment

In June 1978, I was an idealistic young trail manager hired by Hugh Morton to implement a hiking fee program. I assured Hugh Morton that the fee program would help reclaim the mountain's trails and break even. I soon discovered that most hikers didn't think anyone should own a mountain, much less exploit it for personal gain.

Eventually, public support did come. Aggressively high standards of trail maintenance swayed some. So did the high-quality map that came with a trail pass. Others liked the safety registration system. New trails opened. A half-century-old backpacking shelter was discovered and rebuilt. The parking lot and other development clusters were built on Grandfather's lowest summit rather than impacting the highest summit.

Academicians, who had shunned Grandfather, discovered that the backcountry program welcomed researchers and that the mountain is one of the East's premier natural areas. Endangered species of both bats and squirrels were discovered. And the Southern Appalachians' first reintroduction of the peregrine falcon took place on the peak. Ultimately, published sociological research showed that hikers supported the program, and the mountain's example was cited to gain support for user fees at other sites. Many private preserves and even public parks have followed suit.

Just as the trails rebounded, the Parkway opened around the mountain to huge crowds. A first-class nature museum opened, with natural history exhibits and daily nature films, many made by Morton, who's an award-winning filmmaker as well as a still photographer. He worked with Walter Cronkite on a PBS special exploring the problem of acid rain on the world's mountains. His activism in the 1980s helped pass

a law that still keeps North Carolina mountain peaks free of summit high-rise development.

## Well-deserved recognition

Ultimately, Morton received a National Park Service award for his amicable settlement of the "missing link" controversy.



Photo by Randy Johnson, ©2004

Rhododendrons bloom near Grandfather Mountain.

Today, the Grandfather Mountain area is one of the most popular parts of the Parkway and the world's only privately owned international biosphere reserve designated by the United Nations. The backcountry is preserved under long-term scenic easements with the Nature Conservancy. And Hugh Morton, a man who proved that there's profit in preservation, is receiving a lot of recent recognition. In retrospect, Morton's

"ownership" is now widely seen as "stewardship." As it turns out, his mountain was inventing ecotourism long before the term existed.

Last winter, many North Carolinians and others paused to read his new photographic retrospective, *Hugh Morton's North Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press). At the same time, the Society of American Travel Writers voted to give Morton its Phoenix Award for environmental achievements.



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Grandfather Mountain is the world's only privately owned international biosphere reserve designated by the United Nations.

It's fitting that more people appreciate Morton's role in protecting his mountain. Grandfather, arguably the scenic epitome of the Southern Appalachians and the geographic and environmental heart of the Blue Ridge Parkway experience, is really everyone's mountain. Hugh Morton knew that all along.

*Randy Johnson is the editor of United Airlines' award-winning magazine Hemispheres and the author of Hiking the Blue Ridge Parkway: The Ultimate Travel Guide to America's Most Popular Scenic Roadway and Best Easy Day Hikes Blue Ridge Parkway, both 2003 by Falcon/Globe Pequot Press. For information visit [www.randyjohnsonbooks.com](http://www.randyjohnsonbooks.com). You can explore Grandfather Mountain at [www.grandfather.com](http://www.grandfather.com).*