

## The Grandfather Backcountry: A Bridge Between the Past and Preservation

By **Randy Johnson**

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I first encountered Hugh Morton's mountain during a quest to find the most alpine peak in the South. After driving to the Mile-High Swinging Bridge, I climbed ladders up the Grandfather Trail across rocky peaks nearly a vertical mile above the Piedmont. The view knocked my socks off—undoubtedly the same vista that convinced Andre Michaux he'd climbed "the highest mountain in all of North America" in 1794.

That was my initiation to the spectacular backcountry of Grandfather Mountain. The ultimate preservation of that parcel may represent the pinnacle of Hugh Morton's legacy.

### Backcountry Beginnings

In the early 20th century, the legendary Joe L. Hartley, Sr. (father of later mountain managers Joe Lee, Jr. and Robert Hartley) roamed the mountain as warden. After the mountain was logged, a firebreak he cut across the crest renewed (or became) the Grandfather Trail. The now-defunct Shanty Spring Trail evolved from a path that was chronicled by Shepherd Dugger in his 1934 *The Balsam Groves of the Grandfather Mountain*.



*Clyde Smith painting Linville Gorge sign, 1950s-1960s*  
[http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?morton\\_highlights.318](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?morton_highlights.318)



Family hiking Grandfather Mountain trail, Sept. 1963  
[http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?/morton\\_highlights.2643](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?/morton_highlights.2643)

By the 1940s, Blowing Rock Boy Scout leader and seasonal Blue Ridge Parkway ranger Clyde Smith was informally clearing trails. His classic signs led hikers across the mountain (and along the Appalachian Trail—the Appalachian Trail Conservancy headquarters proudly displays one of his hand-routed signs). Smith also opened the Daniel Boone Scout Trail and built the “Hi-Balsam” backpacking shelter. Through the 1960s, many adventurous families—and even Hugh and Julia Morton—took to those trails.

By the 1970s, Smith’s signs lay rotting in the snow. The ladders were unsafe. The Boone Scout Trail had disappeared. The Storm-flattened Hi-Balsam shelter was only a memory to Johnny Cooper, Grandfather’s eldest maintenance man (he “mowed” the trails on infrequent forays into the backcountry).

### **Looking Back at the Backcountry**

For years, college friends and I alternated winter climbs of Mount Washington in New Hampshire with January camping on Grandfather. On one mid-’70s summer hike on Shanty Spring Trail, I found “no trespassing” signs and a security guard turning back hikers. Someone had died from hypothermia. Trails were overgrown. Searches for lost hikers were becoming more frequent.

I decided I couldn’t stand by and see the mountain closed to the public. In 1977, I met with Hugh Morton in Linville.

I made the case that a professionally run, user fee-based trail management program could keep the backcountry open, enlist public support, and possibly break even financially. My own wilderness management research, funded by the U.S. Forest Service and Appalachian Mountain Club in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, inspired my optimism. Morton was skeptical. He said that no one at the Mountain was qualified to run such a program. I responded, “Hire me.”

It’s been argued that Hugh Morton caused significant damage to the Mountain by building the Mile High Swinging Bridge, but at least one element of that history resonated with hikers: the “top” of Grandfather’s tourist road is not the top of the Mountain. Unlike so many other auto-accessible public peaks, Morton’s development perches on the Mountain’s lowest peak, at the periphery of Grandfather’s backcountry.

Hikers eventually became ardent proponents of Grandfather's trail program. Clean and well-marked trails made a big difference; so did trail permits that formed a safety registration system (like today's state park policy on Grandfather). I relocated and reopened the Daniel Boone Scout Trail, then searched for, found, and with the help of many volunteers rebuilt the long-lost Hi-Balsam Shelter. Ladders were replaced, often with volunteer groups like Outward Bound (still relied upon by state park managers). New trails were built (Nuwati, Cragway, and later Profile).

With Morton's agreement, I set out to acquire formal trail and backcountry designations that publicly validated the mountain as a nationally significant natural area. The mountain became a NC Natural Heritage Area in the early 1980s; the Grandfather and Daniel Boone Scout Trails were then named National Recreation Trails by the Department of the Interior in 1986.

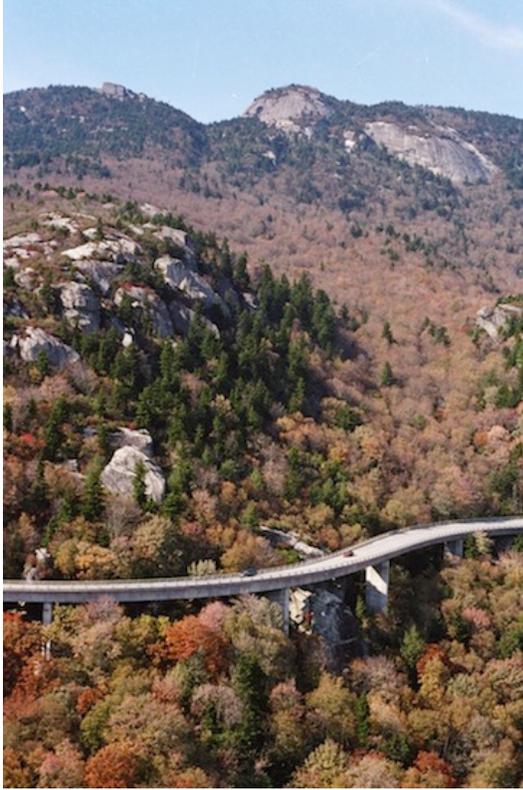
Turning to my research roots, I urged that the mountain encourage the kind of studies conducted in national parks and forests. Only scientists could corroborate that Grandfather Mountain stood out as a significant natural area to visit—and preserve.

Morton permitted me to attend and present my own papers at dozens of academic meetings. I invited researchers of all kinds to study the mountain and inform its management. Resulting projects targeted the balsam woolly aphid, acid rain, flying squirrels, and more. Trails were rerouted and campsites closed to protect plants. The once heavily visited Black Rock Cliffs Cave was gated to insulate endangered bats. In 1984, the Southern Appalachians' first peregrine falcons were released on the peak. Grandfather Mountain employees and volunteers labored long and hard to help researchers in many fields.

In 1987, a study of hikers at Grandfather Mountain and Linville Gorge Wilderness appeared in the influential *Journal of Leisure Research*. Research by the Virginia Polytechnic Institute School of Forestry informed the ongoing national debate over recreation user fees by showing that hikers strongly supported fees if they prevented deterioration of trails (a "dedicated fee," in recreation management jargon). Grandfather's trail program registered a 98% fee compliance rate during the study.



*Grandfather Mountain peregrine falcon site construction, 1984*  
[http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?morton\\_highlights.7089](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?morton_highlights.7089)



*Linn Cove Viaduct aerial view, with Grandfather Mountain in background, 1980s-1990s\**  
[http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?/morton\\_highlights.2311](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?/morton_highlights.2311)

Meanwhile, the Blue Ridge Parkway was “coming ‘round the mountain.” Hugh Morton surely wanted continued profitability for the tourist attraction when he argued against a “high route” for the road. Nevertheless, who can deny—or regret—that a lower Parkway route maximized preservation of the mountain’s backcountry?

Mr. Morton and I worked closely with Superintendent Gary Everhardt and Parkway planner Bob Hope, fearing that extensive new backcountry access would threaten sensitive plants and fee system compliance. We hoped the interconnected trail system being forged with planners of the Parkway’s “parallel trail” (later named the Tanawha Trail) would minimize management challenges and offer world-class hiking. When Parkway planners asked to take the trail above Parkway property on Rough Ridge, Hugh Morton ceded the extra acreage at no cost.

## Time of Transition

At first, Morton declined to even mention trails in the mountain’s brochures. He didn’t want casual tourists to think they had to work to see the mountain.

Times changed. As we turned the “problem” of the backcountry into promise, I maintained that growing publicity for hiking was good for the bottom line. It should be noted: Hugh Morton surely understood that the enthusiastic constituency of hikers, researchers, and nature lovers being created by the mountain’s trails would inevitably constrain his or anyone’s ability to portray Grandfather as “just another piece of private land.”

As conservation easements evolved, I encouraged his interest, bluntly telling him that without permanent preservation, some future owner could “rewrite your biography.” In one 1980s meeting, Parkway superintendent and former National Park Service director Gary Everhardt took me aside to urge, “With everything you’ve got going on in the backcountry, you ought to talk to Hugh about participating in the Man and Biosphere program.” Others and myself did so, and some years later, the backcountry achieved another distinctive designation—the world’s only privately owned International Biosphere Reserve.

## A New Phase

The vast hulking beauty of the Grandfather backcountry—once in the background—is now front and center as North Carolina’s newest state park. The new non-profit Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation markets nature more than ever, even to less active travelers.

However, some (particularly staunch environmentalists) still display condescension toward Hugh Morton and his legacy. Morton was puzzled when those folks excoriated him, once telling me, “Some people just don’t know who their friends are.” Surely, Hugh Morton evolved over the years, but I can assure you, from my experience, he was a friend of the environment.



Trail managers Randy Johnson and Steve Miller, 1989

[http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?morton\\_highlights,1977](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?morton_highlights,1977)

Morton’s eventual openness to conservation easements (much less the outlandish idea of a self-supporting, backcountry preservation system) reflects our new reality: private landowners are of pivotal importance in the future of conservation. Despite the naysayers, Hugh Morton was ahead of that curve. Grandfather’s backcountry “experiment” successfully spanned the years before strategies were ready to permanently preserve one of the United States’ natural landmarks.

While Hugh Morton did not personally devise the Mountain’s backcountry program or the strategies undertaken to implement it, he encouraged my vision for the backcountry because he too passionately believed in permanent preservation for the mountain. Conservation easements and state park status were years in the future; Grandfather’s backcountry program was his (and my) way of heading in that direction even when the way forward wasn’t clear.

The mountain is now “safe”—but the backcountry phase of Hugh Morton’s evolution remains an under-appreciated step between his development of Linville Peak in the early 1950s and his “environmental awakening” in the 1990s. The private land program of backcountry management forged in the interim at Grandfather was itself an innovative, nationally visible environmental achievement – one that is unfortunately overlooked in most histories of the Mountain (and also, notably, in Anne Whisnant’s 2006 book *Super Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History*).

The bottom line, as they say, is that Mr. Morton found profit in preservation at Grandfather Mountain. Under Hugh Morton’s stewardship, what we today call ecotourism was emerging at Grandfather Mountain long before the term was coined. Even the most ardent environmentalists can only applaud that development.

—Randy Johnson

\* The opening of the Linn Cove Viaduct and the Parkway in general offered significant new access opportunities for hikers wanting to avoid Grandfather's user fee or simply reach once inaccessible and sensitive sites. Black Rock Cliffs Cave, located in the boulder-covered outcrop to the right of the road, received substantial "bushwhack" access. That added traffic in part made it wise to gate the cave to protect the Virginia Big-Eared bat colony. The "high route" proposed by the Parkway would have taken the road significantly above the rocky area above the Viaduct. Like Black Rock Cliffs Cave just above the new Parkway, once rarely visited Pilot Knob also started seeing significant new traffic from hikers and rock climbers. Ultimately, Pilot Knob was "closed" to hikers (as it remains under state park jurisdiction).

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