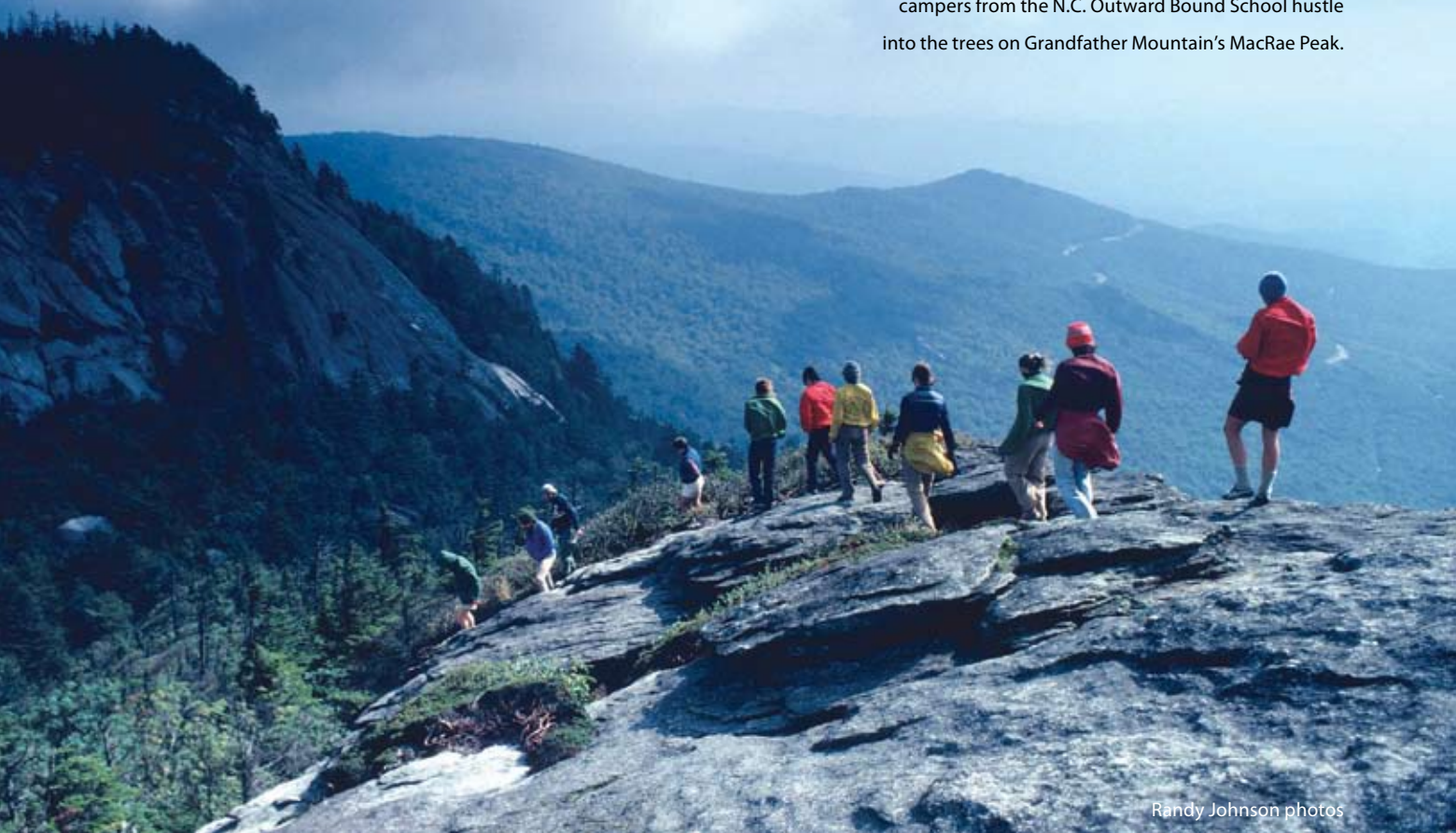


Gimme shelter: A group of wind-blown young campers from the N.C. Outward Bound School hustle into the trees on Grandfather Mountain's MacRae Peak.



Randy Johnson photos

RECLAIMING SHELTER ON HIGH

Rebuilding Historic Hi-Balsam on Grandfather

Story and Photography by Randy Johnson

For months, Grandfather Mountain's septuagenarian maintenance man, Johnny Cooper, had been asking me, "Have you found that Boy Scout cabin yet?" No, I hadn't. And despite the magical twinkle in the old man's eyes, I was beginning to doubt that it even existed.

I'd come to Grandfather in late 1977 to reclaim and manage the mountain's trail system after searches, rescues and a hiker death had closed the trails. Since my arrival, Johnny had regaled me with stories of the "wild side" of Grandfather and the "Boy Scout Trail" up the "backside" of the mountain to Calloway Peak—the highest summit at 5,964 feet.

I spent a year connecting

the dots—locating decaying trail markers and tracing the old trail route between them on hands and knees—but I hadn't found the first cabin clue. No roofline to catch your eye in the underbrush. No side



Even in 1973, the first time I reached Calloway Peak, I was saddened by

the neglected state of the mountain's obviously classic trail signs.

Five years later, as an employee, I carried this one off the mountain.

trail leading off to an idyllic campsite.

I didn't expect to find anything. It would have been about 35 years since the cabin was built—if there were one. The Daniel Boone Scout Trail, as rotting old signs called it, was completely overgrown—a location where hikers routinely got lost—and a major reason why the trail had to be reopened if public access was going to continue on Grandfather's private land. The remaining old trail markers, actually coffee can lids painted white and bearing a red Indian arrowhead, were just a few years from completely rusting away.

I have no idea when the weed-eater was invented, but after months of hand prun-

ing and swing-blading, the old path was cleared and reopened in 1979. The experience convinced me that I knew exactly what early mountaineers went through when they harvested fields of hay by hand.

People began surging up the “new” trail, preoccupying my time. But between carrying waterlogged old wooden trail signs off the mountain and occasionally discovering some other ancient trail marker, the rich history of the mountain and the “Boy Scout Trail” stuck with me.

One day, I decided to explore below the cliffs of Calloway Peak—the crag where early botanist André Michaux sang out “The Marseilles” after he climbed the mountain in 1794; where botanist Worth Weller died in a 1930s fall searching for salamanders. I traced the cliffs well down the ridge into a broadening bowl where distant views and the growing gurgle of Wilson Creek dropped to the Piedmont.

When the terrain really started plummeting, I went back to the diminishing cliffline to hop back up to the Boone Trail. But the face grew higher. I spotted a sloping ledge, weighed the danger of a fall where no one would likely find me, and scrambled up.

Grabbing the lip of the cliff, I pulled myself over—and there it was. A decaying, three-sided trail shelter sat 15 feet from the cliff top—a balcony seat overlooking a vertical-mile drop to the flatlands. I couldn’t believe my eyes. A wave of goose bumps almost dislodged my grip.

I sat down and just looked. It seemed deflated, sagging with age. No wonder I hadn’t found it. There was only one practical way to the shelter—up the cliff. The other three sides were obstructed and ob-

scured by fallen forest.

I instantly saw what had happened. The briefest crawl around told the tale. The spruce forest behind the shelter, no doubt heavy with ice and snow, had been flattened by high winds. The stoutest branches pierced the roof. Decades of water seeped in and the shelter collapsed.

I ducked under the front roof and marveled that the side walls and main beam still supported the building. Where the roof shed water, the shelter stood intact and you could vividly imagine the once-cozy interior. I sat in the shade on the shelter’s forward-most log, leaned back on the logs that defined the front entrance and marveled at a design I’d never seen in any other shelter. I sensed that I was sharing that seat with countless long-absent campers.

Before I left, I pulled brush away from the structure to let the air dry it. Ducking past one side, I noticed a sign hiding on the outside wall in the shadow under the still sheltering apex of roof. It was wide on one end, narrower on the other, with artfully serrated edges. It appeared to be redwood and looked almost new. Crisply routed, white-painted words read “Hi-Balsam.”



Not “High Balsam,” as in altitude. But “Hi,” as in hello. As in greeting a friend or feeling welcome in a special place. Somehow, I knew that people would again sleep in Hi-Balsam.

“I found the Boy Scout cabin!” I told Johnny Cooper the next day. With the Boone Trail open again, and the shelter rediscovered, I finally understood that it was some of Cooper’s own past that was being reclaimed—updating his memories of infrequent maintenance hikes over the mountain when he’d “mow the trails” and see the shelter. He looked at me, beaming. “I told you h’it was out there,” he said.

That was summer 1979. The process of rebuilding the shelter started with getting Hugh Morton’s support for the project—not difficult, given his embrace of my trail effort. Groundwork included contacting the Historical Preservation branch of state government. At the time, I knew the most historic trail shelters in the country were passing 50 years old—and thus eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Oddly, none have been designated—and only today is the topic being widely discussed.

If historic designation seems outlandish, consider that these Adirondack-style lean-tos have their origin in America’s pioneering past. The earliest shelters on the Appalachian Trail were built by the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps and show remarkable stonework and craftsmanship. Many early shelters have been lost to decay or removed by managing agencies that can’t maintain or replace them. Hi-Balsam shared that legacy, and I wanted to restore the hut, if possible, and see it designated as a “place unique to mountain wilderness, an important link



This is the view of the shelter (lower left) that greeted me when I crested the cliff. A later volunteer, shown here, was among the first people in decades to sit in the shelter. The trees that felled Hi-Balsam (lower right).



to one special aspect of our past,” as Janet Hutchison of the NC Division of Archives and History told me.

The more research I conducted, the more significant the shelter seemed. Turns out, the cabin and the Daniel Boone Scout Trail were built during the dark, early years of World War II by a Blowing Rock Boy Scout Troop led by Clyde F. Smith, a seasonal Blue Ridge Parkway Ranger who came South in the summer and went back to New England in winter.

Smith and his shelter are a unique part of America’s outdoor heritage. For decades he “maintained trails all over the place,” said his son, New England photographer Clyde H. Smith. The elder Smith was an artist with a router and small axe, crafting elegantly rustic signs up and down the Appalachian Trail—and on Grandfather. Today, his signs have been retired (due mostly to mileage changes), but the best examples of Smith’s work, such as the massive sign atop Mount Katahdin in Maine, the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, hang on public display in places like the Appalachian Trail Conservancy headquarters in Harper’s Ferry, WV.

A figurative guide for thousands who’ve hiked the AT, Smith may be most noteworthy as a lifelong example of the volunteer spirit. He died while maintaining the Appalachian Trail near Roan Mountain in 1976, five years before Hi-Balsam was rebuilt.

Jack Corman disassembles Hi-Balsam. The high school-friend of the author, now a longtime US Forest Service employee in Northern Virginia, played a key role in the shelter’s reconstruction.

Smith believed in individual responsibility for trails, a key element of the trail program at Grandfather where hikers pay a small user fee to fund maintenance. Helping to build the original Hi-Balsam may have sparked later public service by Smith’s young scouts. Former North Carolina Governor James Holshouser was one of those.

When the time came to gingerly disassemble the fragile shelter and build the new, a cadre of volunteers stepped forward to make the dream a reality. Every log had to be cut, carried to the site, peeled, preserved with copper naphthenate, notched, stacked and spiked. An exact replica of the original shelter took shape—save for a plank floor where the original had logs. We were on a shoestring budget, so we used largely scrap materials for rebuild-

In the years after World War II, Hi-Balsam’s first heyday was a nostalgic page out of a 1950s Boy Scout handbook. Historic photos by Clyde H. Smith.

ing the shelter. Every board, every nail and hammer was carried to the summit.

Instructors and students from the North Carolina Outward Bound School were invaluable, as they are today in maintaining Grandfather’s trails. Individuals such as Virginia forester Jack Corman, Jerome Barrett of Jonas Ridge, Steve Owen of Boone, the local chapter of the Sierra Club and many others helped.

Not long afterwards, I told someone at Grandfather how lucky I was to find a trove of discarded planks in the old maintenance shed. That’s fine, I was told, just be sure not to use a “special” stack of “antique rock maple lumber.”

Oops. It was too late. The triple-weight planks had already been carried up the hill.

On Friday, August 21, 1981, I hiked to Hi-Balsam early, placed the directional sign at the proper place along the Boone Trail, took out my pruners and opened the formal entrance to the shelter.

A few weeks later, corners on the expensive roof shingles started to disappear. As you can imagine, you too would object to vandalism if you’d carried roll after roll of tarpaper and pack after 50-pound pack of shingles up 2,000 vertical feet.



Randy Johnson photo



Building a shelter on a summit is as strenuous as these photos make it look. Jerome Barrett and Jack Corman (left to right) raise the walls .

Later, Corman, Steve Owen (in middle), and Barrett, prepare a tasty shingle lunch for "the summit pig."

Long story short—staking out the place revealed the startling truth. The biggest groundhog I'd ever seen, locally called "whistle pigs" in times past, enjoyed sunning himself on the roof—and nibbling on the shingles!

That's when the real work started. Yes, we carried sheets of metal roofing to the shelter and covered the shingles. We had no more problems with what came to be

called "the summit pig." By then, the roof was 3 inches thick. I do know this—no falling tree will ever again pierce the roof of Hi-Balsam.

One day I got a note from Clyde H. Smith, saying that he'd tried to reach me but when he couldn't, he'd hiked to the shelter alone. His note said, "I think my father's spirit will continue through the rebuilding of Hi-Balsam." I can only imagine

how he felt when he walked into the shelter and saw his dad's picture on a poster inside.

Over the years, thousands have camped at the shelter, including Hugh Morton. In the mid-'80s, during the re-introduction of peregrine falcons high on the mountain, we left the NC Wildlife Commission folks at their worksite, hiked across Calloway Peak and spent the night

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The rebuilt shelter in 1981. Randy Johnson photo

at the shelter. I don't think he recognized his special antique rock maple boards on the ceiling. It was Hugh Morton's final visit to the summit of his mountain.

This summer, trail manager Steve Miller plans some work on the old building. In the corner where the rain and snow blow in, the lowermost log—one of the originals—has collapsed and the rearmost portion will be replaced. That'll probably happen in August, when the shelter turns 25—or 65 if you're counting from the beginning.

That makes it historic to me. I'm a quarter century older, and the mountain gets higher and rockier every year. Only six of the original logs could be reused, so historic designation never took place. But the shelter is still considered historic, and "it is possible

that at a later date, the commendable attention in the reconstruction to the unique form of the structure, may qualify the shelter for recognition."

Twenty-five years of that "later date" has passed. After another twenty-five, even the reconstruction may qualify for historic status. In that future High Country summer, one that I hope I'll see, Hi-Balsam will be ninety years old.

Longtime Boy Scout Randy Johnson started Grandfather Mountain's modern trail program. He is the author of *Hiking the Blue Ridge Parkway* and in August, the second edition of his revised and expanded book *Hiking North Carolina* debuts. Johnson dedicates this article to the memory of Hugh Morton.



Chris Johnson (left), son of the author, and Zach Dooley, son of Todd resident J.D. Dooley, spent Father's Day weekend 2006 with their dads at Hi-Balsam. More than half a century of sheltering campers continues.