

“MAKING THE MOUNTAIN PAY”: HUGH MORTON’S
GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN AND THE CREATION OF WILDERNESS

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School

Appalachian State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2011

Department of History

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ABSTRACT
“MAKING THE MOUNTAIN PAY”: HUGH MORTON’S
GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN AND THE CREATION OF WILDERNESS (May 2011)

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Grandfather Mountain, located in western North Carolina, was a private tourist attraction throughout the twentieth century before it was sold to the state as a park in 2009. As one of the most prominent private tourist attractions in the South, Grandfather Mountain offers an opportunity to examine the evolution of the tourism industry and its relationship with the government. Hugh Morton, Grandfather Mountain’s owner, also used language invoking natural preservation, wilderness, and conservation to help sell the mountain to tourists. Over the course of his ownership, the mountain developed into a recognizable symbol for wilderness and natural beauty, and through association with these concepts the peak attained public recognition as a natural enclave. This public support created friction between environmentalists and Hugh Morton in the late twentieth century, with the debate over the development of portions of Grandfather Mountain exhibiting much of the language used in the wider national debate over appropriate use of natural resources.

Utilizing letters, manuscripts, government documents, newspapers, and video footage, this thesis argues Morton’s use of the mountain was consistent with his role as developer and businessman. During the twentieth century the growth of the environmental movement and Morton’s own celebratory language encouraged the identification of

Grandfather Mountain with a wilderness ideal. As the mountain attraction grew in popularity, Morton carefully nurtured a public perception of the mountain as a wild and pristine reserve, a perception that later influenced how the public responded to his further development of property for commercial reasons. Reading media accounts and public interviews against personal letters and government reports, this thesis argues that Morton created a public perception of Grandfather Mountain that he did not believe in himself. His personal role in the environmental movement, active advertising campaign that emphasized natural beauty and personal association with the mountain created a perception that did not reflect reality, but ultimately encouraged the conservation of the mountain. In this way, Morton's carefully constructed public persona resulted in the protection of the mountain beyond anything he accomplished in his lifetime.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of Walter John Bo

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project benefitted tremendously from the assistance of several people. Neva Specht provided the inspiration for this topic during a research assistantship for an NEH Landmarks in American History summer workshop. Bruce Stewart's Appalachian History seminar provided not only a foundation in the historiography of a region, but a place to question the role of outsiders in a region cast as insular and examine the complex economics of the twentieth century southern highlands. Both of these professors were also quite willing to assist outside of class, and were excellent sounding boards early in the process.

Dr. Silver deserves special mention, not only as chairperson, but because of his willingness to continue working with me through the exceptionally long process that produced this work. Even when confronted by missed deadlines, mediocre drafts, and the tyranny of distance, Dr. Silver continued to provide thoughtful comments and suggestions that substantially improved this work. While at times it appeared I would not finish the draft, his willingness to continue advising helped create a thesis out of what was merely a collection of ideas.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, Rick and Karen, and my wife Courtney. The extended process that produced this work was stressful for all involved, and perhaps most unfairly for them. Despite my shortcomings, their faith never wavered, and for their strength and assurances I am truly grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

The Competing Versions of Hugh Morton and His Mountain

“Ownership was a technicality. A couple of generations of North Carolinians have felt like it was their mountain. You know what, they were right. And when this deal is done, they'll be right all over again.

-Crae Morton, 2008

“Stop that crazy Morton from f----- up Grandfather Mountain . . . any more than he`s already done.”

-Earth Liberation Front, 1990

In 2008, the state of North Carolina purchased Grandfather Mountain, the highest peak in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Citing the legacy of Hugh Morton, the mountain's former owner, family members and state officials alike cast the state's purchase of the mountain as fulfilling his longtime wish to see the mountain permanently protected. More than just the mountain's owner, Hugh Morton was very well known in North Carolina. He was practically a celebrity, and many in the state considered Morton a model citizen and a man of honor and good will. Obituaries frequently cited his “environmentally friendly tourist attraction,” his successful career as a freelance photographer, and his promotional skills.¹ With involvement in several statewide businesses and campaigns, at the time of his death Morton's reputation drew on nearly forty years of constant media exposure. Personally acquainted with the likes of Andy Griffith and Arthur Smith, Morton had a star power that enabled him to move throughout the state in powerful circles. Those that knew him personally universally described him as tenacious,

¹ Ben Steelman, “Hugh Morton: Cancer Claims Wilmington Native,” *Wilmington Star-News*, June 2, 2006.

tireless, and kind. Upon Morton's death, governor Mike Easley said, "If there ever were to be a Mr. North Carolina, it would be Hugh Morton."²

Depending on who tells the story, Hugh Morton was either a noble protector of the Blue Ridge's highest and most notable mountain, or a savvy businessman who profited from the natural beauty of a mountain he despoiled with development. The same events take on wildly different meanings for these competing versions of Morton's life, and even innocuous details can hold great importance. A man of substantial monetary resources and undeniable charisma, Morton was widely known for championing environmental causes like fighting air pollution and damaging ridge top construction practices. He was also widely known as the developer and owner of one of the most ecologically important areas in North Carolina, and his role as developer met with criticism in some circles.

Central to any discussion of Morton is his impact on the mountain he developed. The mountain's unquestionable ecological diversity sparked debates over Morton's effect on the landscape, and the impact of Morton's ownership of the mountain serve as the primary point of dissent among those who tell his story. Some of the questions include: Did Morton preserve the landscape or develop it? What were his motivations? Can development coexist with preservation, and was this Morton's goal? How did these greatly conflicting portrayals of a man come to pass? Any retelling of Hugh Morton's story must answer these questions.

Morton's public reputation was built partially on the growing importance of ideas about wilderness in America. Consummate environmental historian Roderick Nash's work mostly focused on conceptions of wilderness in the American psyche. In a 1970 article in *American Quarterly*, Nash illustrates how the idea of a national park was a uniquely American invention,

² "Nature Photographer Hugh Morton Dies," *The Lumberton Robesonian*, June 2, 2006.

and how national parks drew heavily on conceptions of wilderness. America is “admired” for our national park, “fittingly, because the national park reflects some of the central values and experiences of American culture.”³ Nash effectively demonstrates how national parks created entirely new definitions of how humans were supposed to interact with nature. For the early twentieth century American, wilderness was a rapidly vanishing piece of the frontier past that the middle class viewed as essential to the American experience. Oddly, camping, fishing, and “mountaineering” became increasingly popular as recreation as they decreased in practicality. What pioneers on the western frontier viewed as an unpleasant nuisance, many middle class Progressive Era Americans viewed as an adventure. “Proud of being pioneers, Americans gradually realized wilderness made pioneering possible.”⁴

John C. Miles, in his monograph *Wilderness in National Parks: Playground or Preserve*, provides an in depth look at this specific issue finding, “in most people’s minds national parks and wilderness were synonymous.”⁵ Further reflecting their Progressive Era roots, “parks were set aside for the people.... They were not for elk or bears, swans or eagles, but for the American public.”⁶ Building off evolving conceptions of manliness, men of the early twentieth century ventured into the national parks in search of wilderness. The notion that pioneering served as a characteristically American experience and that this frontier experience was both important to the nation’s health and rapidly disappearing was critical. “America took the lead in parks and preservation because its wilderness was exhausted...” writes Nash, and this wilderness was

³ Roderick Nash, “The American Invention of National Parks,” *American Quarterly* 22, No. 3 (Autumn, 1970), 726.

⁴ Nash, “Invention,” 728.

⁵ John C. Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks: Playground or Preserve* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

deemed vital to becoming a true American.⁷ In this way, the parks served a psychological need. As order, organization, and bureaucracy increased in the cities the national parks provided the American frontier experience in a contained and easily accessible form. While wilderness was preserved in the parks, visitors were not required to join the wilderness. All the benefits of pioneering, and all the beauty of the wild mountain west, were available to urban visitors to national parks with minimal hardship.

Before Hugh Morton was born, Grandfather Mountain already enjoyed a national reputation as a place of beauty and remarkable natural variety. The rugged terrain of Grandfather provided habitats for species more adapted to northern climes, much as the Black Mountains to the south served as islands of species of firs more frequently found in Canada. This ecological diversity served as one of the hallmarks of the mountain's appeal. Joining the larger national conversation on wilderness and preservation, Grandfather Mountain came to symbolize for many North Carolinians a special natural place. It also provided the theoretical foundation for many of Morton's strongest critics. One author, citing Morton's reputation as a friend to nature, argued his "present image as an environmentalist" was constructed in "an elegantly circular fashion."⁸

Morton's life and legacy present a common but understudied paradox of modern environmentalism. The competing versions of Morton's actions portray him as either an environmentalist or a developer. In this dichotomy, business necessarily harms the natural world and environmentalism is inherently anti-development. Despite this illusion of stark differences, however, some historians suggest the possibility of a middle ground. Perhaps environmentalism

⁷ Nash, "Invention," 728.

⁸ Anne Mitchell Whisnant, *Super Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2006), 323.

can coexist with development.⁹ By ceasing to see nature as only wilderness or wasteland, scholars might approach a deeper understanding of humanity's true impact on the landscape. By expanding how we view Hugh Morton beyond the tropes of environmentalist or developer, perhaps scholars can find the true story of Grandfather Mountain's fitful experience under human management.

⁹ William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking The Human Place in Natur*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 69.

CHAPTER 1

Creating “North Carolina’s Top Scenic Attraction”: The Making of an American Icon

“There were others in the division [of property following the dissolution of the Linville Company], but they did not want the mountain because it was not making any money. They did not want to spend the money in developing it to a point where it would pay.”

-Hugh Morton, 1962

The Blue Ridge Mountains, a geological component of the greater Appalachian Mountain chain, form a line of forested peaks stretching from Virginia to Georgia. As the eastern edge of the Appalachian Mountains for much of its length, the Blue Ridge offers sweeping views to the east from many of its summits. These views, combined with natural landscapes and rare ecosystems, resulted in various state parks, national forests, and a national parkway through the area. While the natural beauty of the mountains garnered government attention, much of the land remained in private hands and was developed throughout the twentieth century as part of a tourism-based economy that emphasized the region’s scenic beauty.

The tallest peak in the Blue Ridge and a perfect example of the pivotal role private landowners played in the development of the Appalachian Mountains is Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina. Local stories attribute the naming of the mountain to the profile’s resemblance to an old man’s face, although there is no one vantage point that offers the “correct” profile. Located near the towns of Blowing Rock and Linville in the northwest corner of North Carolina, Grandfather Mountain rises sharply from the land around it and

offers not only the highest peak in the Blue Ridge, but also dramatic views and rugged terrain. Until the late nineteenth century, Grandfather remained largely undeveloped as a result of its steep slopes and remote location. Even with the 1880s founding of the resort town of Linville in a valley adjacent to Grandfather and the ownership of the mountain passing into corporate hands, the difficult terrain spared the mountain from meaningful tourist development well into the twentieth century. As late as the 1950s, the only permanent structures on Grandfather Mountain were a paved U.S. highway low on the slopes and a switchback road to a small parking area and viewing platform.¹

The lack of development did not mean a lack of human impact, however. The slopes of Grandfather suffered many of the same perils that plagued the greater Appalachian region. Logging was the most damaging early human activity on the mountain, especially when coupled with the steep terrain and poor land management practices that accompanied mountain lumber extraction nationwide. Generally, however, the early history of Grandfather Mountain and its impact on the terrain pales in comparison to the changes wrought by a single man beginning in the 1950s.

Hugh MacRae Morton, the mountain's owner and greatest promoter, was the primary voice in telling the story of Grandfather Mountain. To talk about Grandfather Mountain is to talk about Hugh Morton, and both of their stories are vital to understanding how mountain tourism and environmentalism forged a symbiotic relationship. Morton played a foundational role in the beginnings of environmental tourism, and an accurate representation of Morton is vital to understanding how Grandfather became a dominant economic force and environmental symbol of western North Carolina. While some scholarship examining

¹ Harlan Kelsey, "Grandfather Mountain, Shall It be Saved?" *Planning and Civic Comment*, April 1944, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Grandfather Mountain and Morton's role in creating mountain tourism appeared in the late twentieth century, none of the works adequately illustrate Morton's pivotal role in environmentalism, ecological tourism, or the complicated dynamics of private property and environmental preservation.

Fundamentally altering the course of mountain development, tourism remains a force in mountain economies and continues to shape landscapes in bizarre and often controversial ways. If environmental tourism is where nature serves as the attraction to tourists, then it was at least partially born on the slopes of Grandfather Mountain. Moreover, the process behind developing Grandfather Mountain as a tourist attraction provides insight to the growth in environmental tourism and the changes in both the landscape and the expectations of the tourists. At the time of Grandfather's opening to the public in 1952, Morton intended for his mountain to be "North Carolina's Top *Scenic* Attraction" (added emphasis).² As the demands of his customers changed, the role of environmental preservation in Morton's plans for Grandfather Mountain combined with the language of the environmental movement and took on increasing importance and public prominence.

Without a biography of Hugh Morton or Grandfather Mountain, much of the scholarly literature available investigates Grandfather only as a part of a larger argument, or as a secondary consideration to an already developed thesis. In much of the scholarly literature, Grandfather Mountain served the needs of whatever larger argument an author was making and frequently appeared only as corroborating evidence for the author's main point. This follows general trends in early tourism historiography as the importance of tourism as a global economic force came under scrutiny in the late twentieth century. Even with the

² Grandfather Mountain Postcard, Appalachian Postcard Collection, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Carol Grotnes Belk Library, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

increased attention paid to tourism, most studies focused on large, internationally recognizable sites such as Paris or the beaches of the Caribbean and neglected smaller or rural sites like Grandfather Mountain.

These initial scholarly forays offered theoretical depth in spite of their shortcomings, especially regarding the importance of tourism as a transformational force in local societies. Rather than simply focusing on the economic impact of tourism, scholars drew larger conclusions from their cultural investigations as historians joined anthropologists, sociologists, and economists in attempting to understand the global and local importance of the tourism industry. Even as other scholars investigated the impacts of tourism in the wider historiography, Appalachian historians were slow to identify the importance of tourism to the economies of Appalachian communities. This gap in the historiography reflected several possible problems with Appalachian history and who wrote this history. By the end of the twentieth century, however, tourism appeared in histories about the Appalachian region and some scholars penned entire works on tourism-related topics.

Significant among these works and of particular interest to Grandfather Mountain is Anne Mitchell Whisnant's *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History*, which includes a full chapter on the peak and its owner. In perhaps the strongest treatment of the western North Carolina tourism industry's relationship with the government, *Super-Scenic Motorway* discussed the Blue Ridge Parkway as a product of local North Carolina boosters while emphasizing the federal government's role in encouraging tourism through national parks. Her emphasis on the government offered a unique counterargument to the popular history of the region which only recognized its role in preserving park areas and largely attributed governmental involvement to a desire to protect some areas from tourism

development. Combating this myth, Whisnant found the Parkway was a result of tourism boosters lobbying the government for assistance more than an idealistic attempt to preserve land. Using the Parkway routing battle over Grandfather Mountain as one of her key examples of the marriage of public and private interests, Whisnant examined Hugh Morton's dynamic personality and how he developed his Grandfather Mountain property.³ The fight over the Parkway's route proved to be a defining moment in Grandfather Mountain history, although Whisnant's book investigated the Parkway mostly from the perspective of the Park Service. Despite focusing primarily on the importance of Grandfather Mountain to the Federal agency, Whisnant's work is one of the few scholarly treatments of the mountain that traces its history through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In *Super-Scenic Motorway*, Grandfather Mountain enters the narrative with a sufficient amount of background, but the treatment of Grandfather is clouded by Whisnant's need to keep the conversation focused on the National Park Service. Morton's environmental credentials are questioned frequently in the work, and Whisnant's approach resulted in a version of Hugh Morton's story that portrayed him as a paramount businessman always in pursuit of a profit. This perspective stood at odds with Morton's popular perception as an environmental champion, and Whisnant met resistance when she tried to reshape attitudes towards Morton and his fight with the Park Service.⁴ To understand Whisnant's perspective, it is helpful to acknowledge the overwhelmingly positive public opinion of Hugh Morton in his home state of North Carolina. According to Whisnant's analysis of Morton's public fight over the routing of the Blue Ridge Parkway on Grandfather Mountain, any environmentally

³ Anne Mitchell Whisnant, *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History*. (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2006), 263-325.

⁴ James Hunter, "Hugh Morton and Mildred, King and Queen of the Mountain," *Chicago Tribune*, June 29, 1986.

beneficial outcomes Grandfather experienced under Morton were simply in agreement with the business's bottom line.⁵ While not disagreeing with the overall narrative outlined by Whisnant, this thesis contends the unforeseen environmental consequences of Morton's ownership of the mountain and his environmentalist rhetoric deserve further scrutiny.

Super-Scenic Motorway's chapter on Grandfather Mountain is the most comprehensive scholarly treatment of the mountain, but the majority of the work investigates other events in the conception and building of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Furthermore, while Whisnant offers the most relevant scholarly work on Grandfather Mountain's history, some of the easiest areas to examine tourism in Appalachia were the urban centers and mountain retreats specifically built for vacationers as early as the antebellum period. Asheville, North Carolina, remains perhaps the most important mountain city in the southern Appalachians, and is a city that relies heavily on its tourism industry. As one of the first mountain areas to actively develop its tourism industry, Asheville also serves as a useful point of comparison when examining other tourist attractions. Indeed, Asheville modeled successful tourism development for other towns in western North Carolina. Mirroring Whisnant's conclusions and supporting her overall argument, Richard Starnes argued that a partnership between local boosters and outside capital in Asheville brought tourism to the mountains as a viable business and long-term local growth strategy, and attempted to explain Asheville's tourism industry as a careful combination of natural beauty with an already populated and relatively stable urban subregion.⁶

Starnes' Asheville style of tourism relied heavily on the substantial urban reach of Asheville itself. Established as a town in the 1700s, by the Civil War Asheville was one of

⁵ Whisnant, 322.

⁶ Richard Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 184-192.

the few settlements in Appalachia that could be considered a city and it served as both a market and transportation hub for the region. Unlike the western tourist destinations of Yosemite and Yellowstone, whose natural attractions were popular despite their location in the middle of nowhere, Asheville's advertising cast the city as both a scenic location and an urban civilized beacon shining forth from the Appalachian Mountains. Attempting to overcome stereotypes about backwoods mountaineers and impoverished Appalachian farmers, Asheville's advertising painted the city as distinctly *somewhere*. In addition to the emphasis on the area's urban nature, Starnes' title refers to Asheville's advertising campaign of the same name encouraging tourists to visit the area. "Land of the Sky" referred to Asheville's mountainous nature, but it also diminished the importance of the Appalachian mountain folk who received attention in local color writings that might have frightened off potential tourists.⁷

The Asheville boosters placed their hopes on the growth of tourism and tourists' role as a new commodity that Asheville could rely on for a secure and prosperous future. Bumper crops of tourists supposedly did not pollute local landscapes, were not harmful to other types of industry, and were assumed to be a stable source of money. Despite branching out into this new economic direction, Asheville's economy remained fairly diversified and the role of tourism only supplemented an already prosperous city's options. As an examination of one Appalachian community's tourism industry *Creating the Land of the Sky* succeeds, but Asheville's unique circumstances prevented the wholesale adaptation of the city's tourism

⁷ Appalachian Postcard Collection, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Carol Grotnes Belk Library, Appalachian State University. Boone, North Carolina. For a further exploration of the role Appalachian stereotypes played in society, see Henry Shaprio, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountain and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978)

development to other areas in the mountains and the book's specific focus prevents applying the lessons of Asheville to the broader region without qualifications.

Where *Creating the Land of the Sky* is narrow in scope, C. Brenden Martin's *Tourism in the Mountain South: A Double Edged Sword?* attempted a much wider approach and took a regional view of Appalachian tourism in the same period as Starnes. Martin posits generally that mountain tourism, despite its helpful economic advantages, had many detrimental effects that remained hidden until tourism was already well established and had choked out other businesses. Martin's geographic scope was broader, but ultimately his conclusions mirror those of Starnes. According to Martin, tourism in many economies in Appalachia became an uncontrollable economic force that rarely provided the opportunities it promised, and ultimately Martin's work cast tourism as another of many exploitative industries that characterized Appalachia's impoverished condition.⁸

While offering a broader view than Starnes, Martin's examination of tourism suffered from several factual missteps and offered little analysis beyond echoing Starnes' conclusions in support of the ambivalent nature of mountain tourism.⁹ Still, Martin's book appeared in a relative vacuum of scholarship on mountain tourism and contributed to the historiography. His attempt to approach the subject on a much wider level resulted in an interesting attempt to draw macro economic conclusions rather than studying a specific town or city's evolution. In the relatively small field of Appalachian tourism studies, Martin's monograph at least outlined some broad themes and mentioned notable trends.

⁸ C. Brenden Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South: A Double Edged Sword*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007): 136-137.

⁹ Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South*, 195-224. Among the factual misstatements in the text, Martin states that the Linn Cove Viaduct employed the use of helicopters to lower the precast sections of concrete in building the bridge.

Combining the findings of Starnes and Martin, a reader's impression of tourism in western North Carolina would result in a very incomplete picture with practically no mention of northwest North Carolina and only a cursory mention of Grandfather Mountain. This exclusion of Grandfather likely stems from the nature of the mountain's attractions and its relatively recent development when compared to Asheville. Grandfather Mountain emerged as a tourist destination only in the 1950s, whereas the Asheville tourism industry started during the antebellum period. The mature Asheville economy also offered a very different financial base than area surrounding the Grandfather Mountain attraction, which existed largely outside the sway of Asheville's boosterism.

While offering valuable contributions to a meager historiography, the works by Starnes and Martin failed to adequately integrate the environmental impacts of tourism on the Appalachian Mountains and the influence the mountains had on the growth of that tourism industry. Taking a stylistically different approach in his unconventional but highly readable treatment of the Black Mountains near Asheville, Timothy Silver's *Mt. Mitchell and the Black Mountains: An Environmental History of the East's Highest Peaks* examined the vital role of tourism in the ecological history of Mt. Mitchell. While focused primarily on the environmental aspects of the mountain's historical narrative, Silver deftly illustrates how the majority of Americans who have experienced Mt. Mitchell are tourists and shows the impact the mountain had on those visitors' conceptions of nature. Drawing from Silver's careful analysis of both the environmental motivations behind the creation of Mt. Mitchell state park and the more mundane financial reasoning of the tourism boosters, any investigations of tourism in the Appalachian Mountains must necessarily include acknowledgement of the role

nature plays in the creation of publicly protected areas and the greater impact the tourism industry has on popular definitions of nature.¹⁰

In addition to these scholarly works on the mountains, several popular histories of Grandfather Mountain exist that provide a useful gauge of public perceptions of the peak. Written by people with no formal historical training, including Hugh Morton himself, these works offer almost no analysis of the mountain as a tourist attraction and instead serve as a type of advertisement for the mountain's natural beauty. Several of the popular histories include photographic collections by Hugh Morton illustrating the changing seasons on the mountain and casting the Blue Ridge Mountains as a beautiful scenic wonderland.

The best example of a popular history of Grandfather Mountain is Catherine Morton's collaboration with her father in 1993 on a short work simply titled *Grandfather Mountain*. Briefly outlining the mountain's early history from Andre Michaux's assumption that the mountain was the highest in all of North America to Daniel Boone's supposed bear hunt on its slopes, the small book is filled with romanticized and fanciful depictions of the mountain's past. Glossing over any troubles the mountain faced, the entire work reads like an advertisement for the tourist attractions. Out of twenty-one pages, only one considers the history of the mountain in any detail, and the majority of the piece reflects Grandfather's status as an ecologically sensitive place worth preserving. Implied in the narrative history and explicit in the description of Grandfather's facilities are the environmentally friendly preservation activities of Hugh Morton and his role as benevolent steward of a natural wonder.¹¹

¹⁰ Timothy Silver, *Mt. Mitchell and the Black Mountains: An Environmental History of the East's Highest Peaks*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 256-269.

¹¹ Catherine Morton, *Grandfather Mountain*, Southeastern North Carolina Collection, Randall Library, University of North Carolina-Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina.

While the scholarly works on tourism offer some useful theoretical lessons and practical examples for comparative studies, and the popular histories provide an indication of public opinions about the mountain, no author focused exclusively on Grandfather Mountain or explained how its development figured into the history of mountain tourism. Anne Whisnant offers the best exploration of the mountain's history, but even her work focused primarily on the Blue Ridge Parkway and the National Park Service. When considering Starnes, Martin, or Silver, Grandfather offered a supplementary example of mountain tourism but was not intended to serve as a cornerstone of their narrative. As a result, historians failed to address aspects of Grandfather that did not complement their argument, utilizing only the parts of the mountain's history that supported their wider theses on tourism or environmental history.

Of course, most of the mountain's history took place well before the appearance of a tourist attraction on its peak in the twentieth century. Before Hugh Morton was born, Grandfather Mountain already had a national reputation as a place of beauty and remarkable natural variety. The rugged terrain and high altitudes of Grandfather provided habitats for locally rare species more adapted to northern climes, much as the Black Mountains to the south served as islands of species of firs more frequently found in Canada. The mountain also housed several endangered species unique to its slopes and provided a relative sanctuary in a region with dwindling habitats for many other threatened species.¹²

In addition to its preexisting environmental attributes, Grandfather's tourism industry also began well before Hugh Morton's ownership of the mountain. Morton's grandfather,

¹² Silver, 12-14. While the extension of glaciers to Grandfather Mountain is debatable, the diversity of species and existence of life better suited to northern climes is widely recognized, see John B. McKeon, John T. Hack, Wayne L. Newell, James O. Berkland and Loren A. Raymond, "North Carolina Glacier: Evidence Disputed," *Science* 184, no. 4132 (Apr. 5, 1974): 88-91.

Hugh MacRae, helped found the Linville Company in the late 1800s, and this company was the first tourism developer of the area around Grandfather Mountain.¹³ After remaining sparsely settled for centuries, land developer Samuel Kelsey approached several potential investors about purchasing 16,000 acres of land around Grandfather Mountain.¹⁴ Combining capital from both North Carolina and New England, Kelsey arranged for the incorporation of the Linville Improvement Company to develop the Linville River area, which included Grandfather Mountain, the valleys flanking it, and some of the surrounding peaks. Initially conceived as an industrial venture, the investors quickly redirected the company towards resort development.¹⁵

In a general way, Asheville's forays into tourism served as an example to the Linville Company's founders. Samuel Kelsey had previous experience with developing successful tourist retreats in areas around Asheville and was also responsible for the development of the Highlands resort community in southwestern North Carolina. More than just a developer, Kelsey was one of the key players in the beginnings of the Linville Company and recruited the necessary outside capital that made such a company possible as well as providing some of the expertise required for a successful resort development.¹⁶

The Asheville model's influence on the Linville investors was seen in the type of tourists the Linville Company tried to attract. Before a time when automobiles made day-trips possible, the Linville Company's 1800s development attracted wealthy visitors who would summer for several months in the North Carolina Mountains. This was the most common type of tourism development in the 1880s, when railroads were the main mode of

¹³ "Letters of Incorporation," 426, Lenoir Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁴ "Letters of Incorporation," Lenoir Family Papers.

¹⁵ "Letters of Incorporation," Lenoir Family Papers.

¹⁶ Samuel Kelsey Correspondence, Lenoir Papers; Personal Interview with Catherine Morton, 2006.

long distance transportation and mountain roads were usually little more than graded dirt paths. Initially the Linville Company relied on a combination between a wagon road across Grandfather Mountain and a railroad connection in Blowing Rock to bring its resort residents, but there was strong interest in building a railroad directly to Linville itself in the 1890s and early 1900s.¹⁷

As successful as Grandfather Mountain became, the history of the mountain before Morton was plagued by financial uncertainty. The business leaders who started the Linville Company and brought tourism to the Linville area considered their new company an investment that would follow the lead of successful ventures elsewhere and profit from wealthy pleasure-seekers. When faced with the possible failure of their business plan, the Linville Improvement Company changed direction from strictly developing the valley into a tourist community to utilizing the natural resources of their property to meet short-term financial obligations. The continual refashioning of the company's purpose also demonstrates how the Linville Company, from its inception, served as an investment opportunity first and foremost. Despite this profit motive, some members of the company were more willing to hold onto their hopes for profitability through tourism and voiced their concerns in stockholder meetings and correspondence.¹⁸

When the company faced financial problems, debates among stockholders over the direction of the company and strained relationships between investors manifested themselves in the company taking expedient measures to meet financial obligations. While logging in the early twentieth century was optimistically considered congruent with tourism, the plan to develop Linville as a resort community required a certain amount of environmental

¹⁷ Hugh MacRae to T.B. Lenoir, September 26, 1891, Lenoir Family Papers.

¹⁸ Linville Improvement Company Minutes, July 1896, Lenoir Family Papers.

sensitivity, even by 1880s standards.¹⁹ The land in sight of residential development was spared the ax, while the lots sold for houses were cleared and the lumber milled. Once the Linville Company sold land to private individuals, they no longer controlled how the new owners treated their property. Eventually, the land the Linville Company still owned at the beginning of the twentieth century generally included those less desirable tracks on the slopes of the mountains, although large portions of the Linville River valley also remained undeveloped. The geography of these areas sometimes resulted in failing to fully realize the land's immediate profitability, but aesthetics also influenced whether the company logged an area. Tracts close to Linville were rarely clear-cut whereas the less useful land on the east-facing slopes of Grandfather Mountain suffered timbering. Some areas, especially those on the sharp inclines of Grandfather Mountain's summit, were spared merely due to the difficulty of cutting the timber.²⁰

In the early 1890s, the Linville Improvement Company faced bankruptcy and resorted to selling bonds to pay taxes and bills. Stockholders in the corporation bought all of these bonds, with Hugh MacRae (Hugh Morton's grandfather) and his close relatives purchasing a controlling stake in the company's debt. Following several disputes over company management Hugh MacRae emerged with control of the company and the reins of the corporation largely in his hands.²¹ Even with the eventual stability in company management, continued financial distress threatened the remaining natural resources of the Linville Company's holdings and resulted in increasingly risky logging operations. To provide building materials and to clear space for resort homes, the Linville Company cleared the land

¹⁹ Railroads in the Black Mountains were thought to be a boon to both tourists and logging companies, with the expectation that the two industries could coexist. Silver, 140-141.

²⁰ Linville Improvement Company Minutes. 1894-96, Lenoir Family Papers.

²¹ Linville Improvement Company Minutes, 1900, Lenoir Family Papers; Hugh MacRae to T.B. Lenoir, January 11, 1900, Lenoir Family Papers.

immediately adjacent to the town late in the nineteenth century, but later logging took on a different character.

A U.S. Forest Service Bulletin from 1908 indicated the Wilson Creek area, a section of Grandfather Mountain approximately halfway downhill from the summit on the eastern facing slopes, suffered recurring fires as a result of logging. Other areas, especially those accessible by wagon roads near Grandmother Mountain and the Elk Creek watershed, were logged well before the report's publication. Other than these areas, however, the Forest Service found in 1908, "with these exceptions the natural forest has not been disturbed."²² The entire report conveys a tone of marketability of the forest's resources, however, and Linville Company documents from the same period indicated the willingness to continue logging Grandfather Mountain in spite of the obvious environmental consequences.

As the resort town developed, Linville differed from Asheville in many ways. While local boosters encouraged tourism in Asheville and placed an emphasis on the enrichment of the city, only one of the original 1880s investors in the Linville Company was from a local county. The Linville Company primarily served as an investment vehicle for the men who founded it, intended to return a profit on their investment rather than enriching the local community and boosting the local economy. The only mountain family involved in the Linville Company was the Lenoir Family, who could only marginally be considered from the Grandfather Mountain region. Emblematic of the approach to the Linville Company among these early investors, a letter from Hugh MacRae to T. B. Lenoir in 1900 said he'd rather "have everyone retain the interest he started with and get all there is in it, or 'go down together.'"²³ The Lenoir family resigned from holding any stock early in the twentieth

²² Forest Service Bulletin, 1908, Lenoir Family Papers.

²³ Hugh MacRae to T.B. Lenoir, January 11, 1900, Lenoir Family Papers.

century, backing out of a Company that faced increasing financial uncertainty. Without the Lenoir Family, the Linville Company consisted entirely of wealthy investors from outside the mountain counties for nearly a half century before Hugh Morton developed it into a tourist attraction.

These wealthy investors included few members outside the MacRae and Morton families so that in the 1940s Grandfather Mountain and its Linville Resort were more akin to personal property than they were any sort of corporation. The reputation of MacRae as a consummate businessman may have played a role in the other stockholders identifying him as an acceptable leader of the Linville Company. Upon his death in 1951, MacRae's holdings in Linville translated to substantial tracts of land, as signified by the prominent role his descendents and family members would play in the expansion and development of northwestern North Carolina.

The importance of the MacRae and Morton families in the development of the region obscures the nature of their investment and the fundamental differences between Asheville boosterism and later tourist attractions like Grandfather Mountain. While local boosters in many areas of Appalachia encouraged outside capital, the Linville Company is an example of outsiders developing an area without local support. Although they owned large tracts of land in western North Carolina for over 50 years, the Morton and MacRae families hailed from Wilmington, North Carolina.²⁴ Hugh MacRae had several other businesses, mostly in Wilmington and eastern North Carolina, and these businesses provided the majority of his prestige and income.²⁵ While the Linville Company was an important business venture,

²⁴ Hugh Morton's grandfather was a MacRae, and the MacRae family dominated the Linville Company since the 1900s. The MacRaes were from Wilmington, and Julian Morton, Hugh Morton's father, married into the MacRae family.

²⁵ Hugh MacRae Correspondence, 1899-1900, Linville Improvement Company Papers, Lenoir Family Papers.

MacRae's focus remained on points east of Raleigh for his entire life. Even the iconic developer of Grandfather Mountain, Hugh Morton, did not declare Linville's Avery County as his official county of residence until 1974, a full twelve years after he developed Grandfather Mountain into a popular tourist attraction.²⁶ Despite his public persona and near legendary status in North Carolina's recent history, during the formative years at Grandfather Mountain, Morton was legally an outsider in Avery County.

Further distancing Grandfather Mountain from its tourism industry predecessors in other parts of North Carolina, the Linville Company faced many obstacles if they intended to copy the success of Asheville. In addition to the diversified economy of Asheville, the city also enjoyed regional recognition as an urban center and boasted excellent transportation links with other parts of the country. Linville had few links to the outside world and well into the 1900s Linville remained a relatively difficult place to visit.

The Linville Improvement Company attempted to build a tourism industry largely from scratch. With Samuel Kelsey as one of its founders the Linville Company had an experienced mountain land developer, but Linville required a different model than most of western North Carolina's tourism industry. Plagued by its poor transportation networks, Linville needed something extra to attract vacationers willing to stay for longer periods. Most of the correspondence in the Linville Company's first three decades regarded transportation improvements, financial problems, and attempts to improve what the investors saw as mismanagement of the property. What Linville really needed was either a modern railroad and wagon road system, or an abandonment of the typical development strategies in

²⁶ Morton moved to Avery County in 1974, nearly twenty-five years after he inherited the mountain, and well after the MacRae family initially invested in the area during the late 1800s. See Whisnant's *Super-Scenic Motorway* as well as personal interview with Catherine Morton.

favor of something new. Ultimately, they continued to choose a middle road that ensured their unprofitability, a path with important implications for the mountains later development.

Through all this financial difficulty, Grandfather itself was never considered a potential centerpiece of Linville's appeal. Despite this failure to fully utilize the mountain's scenery, Grandfather Mountain proved itself early in the twentieth century as a tourist attraction that supplemented the appeal of Linville's resort community. Visitors could travel to the slopes of Grandfather and look out from the Cliffsides overlook across the verdant expanse below. The only tourist attraction actually built on the slopes of the mountain until the middle of the twentieth century, the Cliffsides attraction never amounted to more than a rough graded roadbed snaking its way to a level area with a wooden overlook platform. This rudimentary overlook was not on any of Grandfather's promontories, but was instead perched on the southeast slope well below the future mountaintop attractions.

While not as sophisticated as Hugh Morton's developments, the overlook at Cliffsides established a precedent of tourists willing to part with money to enjoy the beautiful scenery at Grandfather. Cliffsides served as mostly an afternoon diversion, however, and the Linville Company's main focus remained selling resort property in the valleys below. Grandfather Mountain's main contribution to the Linville Company remained its natural abundance of lumber. The company's desire for profit occasionally called for continued logging of land holdings when the real estate did not sell as quickly as hoped. By the time of the Great Depression, the Linville Company had run itself low on cash and had exploited many of the easily available natural resources at its disposal.²⁷

²⁷ Linville Improvement Company Minutes, 1899, Lenoir Family Papers; Hugh MacRae to T.B. Lenoir, January 11, 1900, Lenoir Family Papers.

Partially as a result of the terrain, the early visitor count at Grandfather was modest and it was not until the twentieth century and Morton's further development of the mountain that Grandfather could claim it was North Carolina's "Top Scenic Attraction."²⁸ Part of this change was the advent of the automobile. Morton's attraction was not opened until the 1950s, when autos were stronger and more capable than earlier models and transportation networks encouraged automobile travel. The horseless carriages and early vehicles of the twentieth century were no match for Grandfather's steep inclines and rough roads, but by the middle of the century the average American family owned a car that could climb the mountain. Morton's paved road and switchbacks turned what previously was a barely accessible peak into an easily attainable scenic overlook, and the luxury of taking a vacation by car appealed to a new middle class of Americans eager to demonstrate their prosperity.²⁹

The automobile also made the development of Grandfather Mountain different from other mountainous areas. Asheville's urban character and specifically its railroad transportation links to major cities brought a steady stream of tourists as early as the antebellum period. The city's grand hotels provided places for these wealthy tourists to stay while they enjoyed the scenic beauty of the "Land of the Sky."³⁰ Asheville functioned as a regional urban center before tourism came to play such a significant role, and with the agricultural surplus of the Swannanoa valley providing a sound basis for urbanization in Asheville, the city only encouraged tourism later as a way of enriching the local area.³¹ In this light, Asheville's economy did not reflect the conditions of Boone or Blowing Rock, the

²⁸ By the late 1950s, Morton used this phrase on his Grandfather Mountain letterhead. BRPA Officers Series, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Carol Grotnes Belk Library, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina

²⁹ Silver, 179-180, 211-223; Dolores Jeffords, "New Lookout on the Blue Ridge Parkway," *New York Times*, October 11, 1953.

³⁰ Starnes, 50.

³¹ Starnes, 16.

two nearest towns to Linville. Asheville's decision to add tourism as a part of its *diversified* economy in the 1800s enabled the city to continue on a prosperous road without tourism.

For Linville, the mountain resort community at Blowing Rock offered the nearest and most successful example of the tourism industry in northwestern North Carolina, but even Blowing Rock was not a large and established tourist town until the twentieth century. Unlike the Asheville area, northwestern North Carolina's mediocre road connections fostered slower growth in the 1800s exemplified by large wealthy estates like Moses Cone's Flat Top Manor and the modest vacation homes of Blowing Rock.³² Without the major railroad connections to population centers, Linville remained a small community.

In contrast to this slow early development of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stands northwestern North Carolina in the 1950s. With its sweeping vistas and abundant natural splendor, the region was billed as a component of a "Variety Vacationland" in the mountain south, and the tourism industry expanded rapidly.³³ This slogan for North Carolina invited new visitors to tour the state and enjoy its natural wonders, and Hugh Morton advertised Grandfather Mountain as "North Carolina's Top Scenic Attraction" when it officially opened to the public in 1953.

After the troubled and confusing transition of ownership following the dissolution of the Linville Company in 1952, Hugh Morton emerged as the owner of Grandfather Mountain and quickly built a tourist attraction on his recently acquired inheritance. In less than five years, Morton built the basics that remained the staple of Grandfather Mountain's appeal. As he prepared the Mountain for its opening in 1952, Hugh Morton "improved" Grandfather's

³² Modest is used here to denote the difference between the Blowing Rock homes, including Flat Top Manor, and those of Asheville, such as the Biltmore Estate. The Biltmore Estate is in an altogether different category in both size and wealth when compared to Flat Top Manor, despite both being built by wealthy industrialists.

³³ "Variety Vacationland" Postcard Pack, Postcard Collection, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection; BRPA promotional material, BRPA Records, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection.

natural appeal with a paved road to the summit of McRae Peak, a visitors' center, a "mile-high" swinging bridge, and a parking lot, enabling visitors to drive to MacRae peak and enjoy a spectacular view without ever leaving their vehicles. If they decided to walk across the bridge to Linville Peak, a panoramic view of the Blue Ridge rewarded them for little physical effort.³⁴

Although culturally and economically important as a draw to tourists, Grandfather Mountain also came to exemplify the dominant development strategy for mountain tourism. Tourism and capitalism were far from new to western North Carolina, but Grandfather Mountain represents a case study for a type of mountain tourism that simultaneously advertised the natural splendor and destroyed some of the environment in the process.³⁵ Within a few years of opening Grandfather Mountain, Morton's new letterhead sported the phrase along with a drawing of the mountain's Mile High Bridge. More than just a clever play on the height of his footbridge, the phrase also alluded to the mountain's record setting attendance figures, which dwarfed numbers posted by other area attractions.³⁶

Central to the success of this new tourism industry were the personal automobile and the new roads North Carolina built into the Appalachians. With the building of the Blue Ridge Parkway, the area was opened to tourists from across the nation and also received the national media exposure that accompanied a national park. Private developments continued

³⁴ "Converts Mountain into Moneymaker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 22, 1959.

³⁵ For an examination of Western North Carolina's economic history, several works could be recommended. Of particular note are John Inscoe's *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996); Mary Beth Pudup, Altina Waller, and Dwight Billings's *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); and especially Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee's *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). There are also broad introductions to Appalachia and the American South that deal with economics, such as the *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, and John Alexander Williams's *Appalachia, A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

³⁶ Hugh Morton began using this term after Grandfather Mountain posted the highest attendance numbers of any single tourist attraction in North Carolina shortly after it opened in 1953. Dolores Jeffords, "New Lookout on the Blue Ridge Parkway," *New York Times*, October 11, 1953.

to make use of earthmoving technology by conquering natural boundaries with pavement and powerful grading equipment, furthering development efforts. While northwestern North Carolina was never completely isolated, the improved access and road networks of the early twentieth century set the stage for a new type of tourism development at Grandfather Mountain.

The new tourism development at Grandfather Mountain bears some resemblance to events taking place elsewhere in the Appalachian region. Both Timothy Silver's *Mt. Mitchell and the Black Mountains* and Richard Starnes' *Creating the Land of the Sky* forwarded the position that tourism frequently caused irreparable harm to the communities where it became the basis of the economy. Tourists shaped and defined the Appalachian people they encountered in a culturally significant way in addition to causing economic consequences by the expansion of a tourist economy. In *Mt. Mitchell and the Black Mountains* Silver argues the motivations for many regulations regarding hunting and fishing resulted more from a desire to attract and ensure an adequate supply of particular game animals than from lofty ecological concerns.³⁷ Moreover, works such as Jane Becker's *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk 1930-1940* show how even handicrafts were exploited by a combination of department stores and the tourism industry portrayal of a distinct "Appalachian folk."³⁸ Northwestern North Carolina would experience a similar wave of cultural exchange, but with Asheville having already paved the way, a different tourist culture was built in the Linville area that skipped many of the evolutionary steps that characterized the Asheville shift to tourism.

³⁷ Silver, 225-232.

³⁸ Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk 1930-1940*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 7.

Following Asheville's lead, Grandfather Mountain initially advertised its scenery rather than the natural environment. The personal car enabled the average American to travel to Grandfather Mountain as a day trip. Hotels and motels in the area also catered to the automobile and the middle-class Americans who drove them. Rather than arriving on trains and staying in lavish hotels in the urban center of Asheville, Grandfather Mountain and the tourism development in the area offered the opportunity to visit the mountains on a modest budget and to travel great distances in a short amount of time. Grandfather made nature and mountain scenery available to average Americans.³⁹

The transition from neglected sideshow to economic engine would have surprised the investors in the Linville Company. Grandfather Mountain was never a profitable stand-alone property for the company, and many at dissolution in 1952 did not think Grandfather Mountain could be profitable as an independent tourist attraction. The rugged terrain of the mountain, the drastically different climate, and the loose soil interspersed with rock all served as roadblocks for standard mountain vacation home development and prevented easy access to the peak. In addition to the terrain posing problems, the company logged the mountain on the accessible slopes, especially those outside the view of Linville itself. When the company's dissolution in 1952 prompted negotiations amongst family members over how to divide the properties held by Linville, Morton met little resistance in his request for the mountain.

Within the MacRae family, it was well known Morton had plans for Grandfather Mountain. Emerging from the dissolution of the Linville Company as the sole owner of Grandfather in its entirety, Morton went to work almost immediately implementing his ideas. Morton's motives were openly stated: he intended to make Grandfather Mountain a

³⁹ "Converts Mountain into Moneymaker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 22, 1959.

profitable tourist attraction. Morton's comments about the road, visitors' center, and bridge clearly demonstrate his desire for Grandfather to pay dividends, and his language is starkly different from later statements and popular histories. In 1959, Morton told the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "there were others in the division [of property following the dissolution of the Linville Company], but they did not want the mountain because it was not making any money. They did not want to spend the money in developing it to a point where it would pay."⁴⁰

While his relatives did not want to spend any money developing the mountain, Morton had a plan for Grandfather Mountain that reflected a new direction in for tourism in the area. Other natural attractions, such as The Blowing Rock, offered tourists an interesting diversion for an afternoon and were certainly commercialized, but these developments catered to visitors who were already in the area. In the 1800s it was unlikely anyone would drive up from Winston-Salem or Greensboro for the day and go to the Blowing Rock. Additionally, other than visiting the outcrop itself, there wasn't much to do at the Blowing Rock other than view the scenery.

With the rise in popularity of the automobile, such a proposition as visiting the mountains for a weekend, or even a day-trip, seemed much more feasible. Morton envisioned an entirely new type of tourist attraction that married the convenience of the automobile with the natural beauty of Grandfather Mountain's scenery. Grandfather's extensive property and unparalleled views also allowed for the mountain to become more than a simple afternoon diversion and serve as a destination unto itself. In addition to providing access to some of Grandfather's more scenic peaks, the building of the mile-high bridge provided a memorable aspect of a tourists' trip to the top of the mountain. A visitors'

⁴⁰ "Converts Mountain into a Money Maker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 22, 1959.

center with educational displays and a snack bar completed the early developments on Grandfather, creating an attraction unlike anything in the area.

A man of substantial monetary resources and charisma, Morton was widely known later in life for championing environmental causes like air pollution legislation and attempting to curb the development of ridge-top mountain land. In light of Morton's fame and public persona, his biography has too frequently been misunderstood or misconstrued, and part of this misunderstanding stems from the remarkable diversity of Morton's activities. While Morton's personal legacy was tied to Grandfather Mountain, economic responsibilities and advocacy issues including his involvement in statewide tourism projects and politics kept him in Wilmington for twenty years. The wide variety of Morton's activities resulted in a wide variety of opinions regarding the man. Seen by some as strictly a shrewd businessman, Morton improved access to Grandfather Mountain's ecologically sensitive Linville peak by carving an environmentally damaging road to the ridge crest, blasting rock, installing a swinging bridge, and building a visitors' center with a parking lot that saddled the mountain's ridge.

Others see Morton as an environmentalist who mostly protected Grandfather from destructive residential development and earned it international recognition as a privately owned park and a UN biosphere reserve.⁴¹ Indeed, when critics question Morton's development of the mountain, it is explained away by saying "If he had not saved that mountain, treated it the way he has, there wouldn't be anything there for anyone to quarrel

⁴¹ U.N. Biosphere Reserves are a part of UNESCO and are similar to a World Heritage Site designation and deem an area worthy of special protections in the event the UN feels the site is "threatened." Most U.S. National Parks are designated as World Heritage sites, and many expansive areas of undeveloped land are designated Biosphere reserves. Morton is considered an environmental hero by the media and many state officials, and continued to do interviews that emphasized his environmental credentials.

over.”⁴² His public comments against air pollution and mountain development, combined with his eventual donation of thousands of acres of easements to the Nature Conservancy, further sway some supporters to consider Morton as an environmental champion.

Understanding Hugh Morton and his mountain development is complicated. Grandfather Mountain, intimately linked with Morton’s legacy, provides a useful lens for interpreting the man behind the mountain’s development. More than any of his other projects, Morton referred to his efforts on the mountain as a labor of love and the peak was the recipient of the majority of his attentions. His relationship with Grandfather and how he treated the mountain throughout his ownership of the peak reflect on Morton’s personality, opinions, and character. The following pages chronicle a few of the major events in Morton’s management of Grandfather, and examining these events enables a greater understanding of both the man and his legacy.

⁴² Bruce Henderson, “Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue Ridge Tract,” *The Charlotte Observer*, April 2, 1990.

CHAPTER 2

“Hugh Morton Knows How to Take Care of Himself:” The National Park Service, Property Rights, and the Marshaling of an Environmental Argument

“Is it not an inescapable duty our citizens of today owe to succeeding generations, to save this masterpiece of Nature intact and unsullied?”

-Harlan P. Kelsey on Grandfather Mountain, 1944

To tell the story of Hugh Morton and his mountain, it is necessary to examine the formative events of the late 1950s. After developing the mountain into a profitable tourist attraction, Morton’s defining moment as owner of Grandfather Mountain took place during his fight with the National Park Service over the routing of Blue Ridge Parkway section 2-H. Starting in the mid-1950s and lasting until 1968, the battle over routing the Parkway on Grandfather Mountain spanned more than a decade and the arguments from either side in the debate featured prominently in North Carolina newspapers. Previous efforts by the National Park Service to buy the mountain notwithstanding, Morton successfully engineered a public debate that shaped public perception and forever changed the way individuals in North Carolina viewed him and his mountain.¹

Morton employed a pivotal public relations campaign that greatly influenced public opinion, but Morton’s best source of support during the attempts to change the Parkway’s route came from powerful friends. Personal letters frequently provided a clear picture of Morton’s motives, yet it was the public posturing involved in his “defense of the mountain”

¹ Harlan Kelsey, “Grandfather Mountain, Shall It be Saved?” *Planning and Civic Comment*, April 1944; “Explorers from Congress Find New National Site,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1924; “Composite National Park Bill Proposed,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1925; “Grandfather Mountain Master Plan,” January 1, 1944, Lands Files, Blue Ridge Parkway Headquarters, Asheville, NC.

that would forever change the way North Carolinians thought of Morton and his mountain. This public posturing not only affected the outcome of the Parkway routing battle, it also influenced the language that characterized early conceptions of environmental conservation in North Carolina. Morton's later reputation as an environmentalist, and his role in defining environmentalism, started with his public arguments against the Park Service.

Anne Mitchell Whisnant's *Super-Scenic Motorway* provides an excellent account of the battle over the Parkway on Grandfather Mountain. Far from seeking to debunk Whisnant's primary argument, this chapter examines the importance of Hugh Morton's public posturing and use of rhetoric. Emphasizing the language Morton used in combating the Park Service and how it created a positive public perception of the mountain attraction's owner required reexamining many of the same events that *Super-Scenic Motorway* chronicled. Building on Whisnant's scholarship, this chapter finds the Parkway routing controversy was more than just a contentious battle over compensation and road placement. Hugh Morton's battle with the Park Service both indicated and influenced broader social and environmental trends, and his public campaign ultimately altered the way North Carolinians viewed the mountain. While much of Morton's rhetoric can be construed as protecting his private tourist attraction, the success of Morton's campaign and the wide dissemination of his argument permanently cast Grandfather Mountain as something more than just a scenic overlook.

Contemporaries saw Hugh Morton's 1950s fight against the Parkway either as a valiant struggle to hold Federal authorities to their public word, or as an obstructionist owner attempting to force the government's hand. These two interpretations cast Morton as either an environmental saint or a capitalist villain; however, Whisnant demonstrated how Morton's motivations were complicated and difficult to reduce to such simple categories. Neither of

these interpretations allowed for Morton's marriage of the two personas, nor did they investigate the motivations behind his actions. In addition, the implications of his environmentalist persona and language affected later developments on Grandfather in complex ways, including actions taken after Morton's death.

As Morton built his mountaintop attraction, several forces beyond his immediate control affected the future of Grandfather Mountain. Morton's 1950s development of the mountain accompanied a general surge in the tourism industry in western North Carolina and a booming postwar economy. Buoyed by newfound prosperity, middle-class Americans found their increasing incomes enabled them to take leisurely vacations. The social, governmental, and cultural changes of the 1950s also drastically altered the world Grandfather Mountain inhabited. As the United States entered a period of substantial change, nearly all tourist attractions and wilderness areas' futures were increasingly affected by the demands of a wider world.²

Other than the private development of the mountain by Hugh Morton, the most demanding force on the landscape in the 1950s was the National Park Service's attempt to complete the Blue Ridge Parkway. The Blue Ridge Parkway remained unfinished nearly twenty years after its groundbreaking, including a gap of nearly eight miles on Grandfather Mountain. While the National Park Service purchased rights of way and constructed much of the Blue Ridge Parkway in the 1930s, by the 1940s and early 1950s the Parkway was still a patchwork of incomplete roadways, with only a few sections fully completed.³ Shortly after Morton inherited Grandfather Mountain out of the Linville Company's dissolution, the

² For histories of tourism, see Silver, *Mt Mitchell and the Black Mountains*; Martin *Tourism in the Mountain South*; Starnes *Creating the Land of the Sky*; and Al Fritsch and Kristen Johannsen, *Ecotourism in Appalachia: Marketing the Mountains*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

³ *Blue Ridge Parkway Brochure*, Appalachian Regional Brochure Collection, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

National Park Service hoped to renew dialogue about the completion of Blue Ridge Parkway section 2-H. After already purchasing some land along U.S. Highway 221 in 1939, the Park Service deemed this earlier right of way unfit for the standards that the Parkway needed and attempted to secure land higher on the mountain's slope.⁴

The Park Service offered defensible arguments for a higher route. The initial right of way that followed Highway 221 was low on the side of the mountain and offered less dramatic scenery than a proposed route at a higher elevation. While a right of way was purchased in 1939, the high route won the favor of National Park Service officials. This route passed higher on the mountain through Pilot Ridge by way of a tunnel and crossed U.S. Highway 221 approximately one mile from the entrance to Grandfather Mountain. As a debate over the Parkway routing developed, the North Carolina Highway Commission also proposed a middle or "compromise" route that featured no tunnel and passed between the other proposals on a roughly parallel course. These three proposals faced varying degrees of construction difficulty and stability concerns, yet scenery factored into the decision-making more than concerns over construction challenges.⁵

⁴ R. Getty Browning, "Report on Blue Ridge Parkway Section 2-H," Lands Files, Blue Ridge Parkway Headquarters, Asheville, NC.

⁵ Ibid.

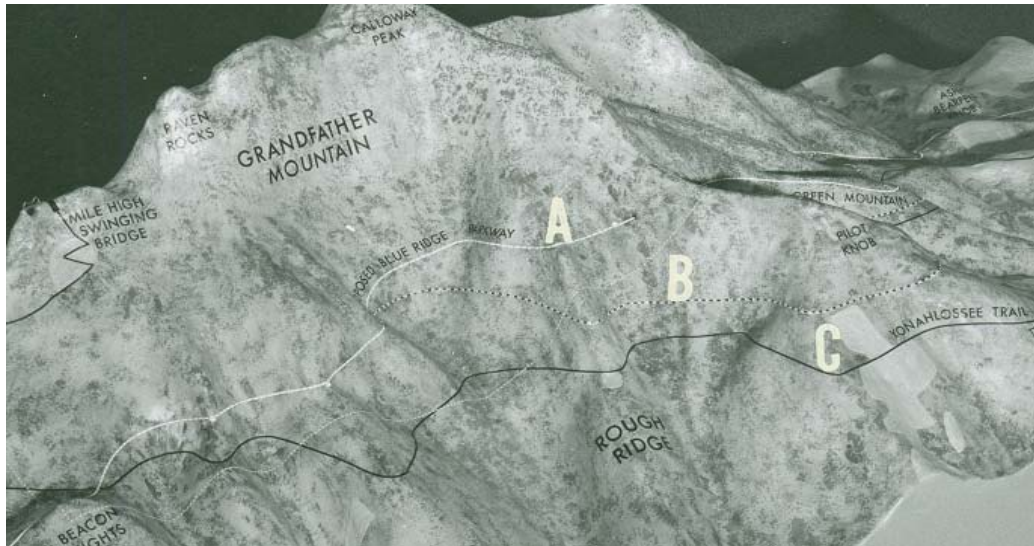


Figure 1: Model of the routing over Grandfather Mountain. Route A represents the high route, B represents the compromise route, and C is U.S. Highway 221, also called the Yonahlossee Trail.

Source: BRPA Officers Series, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection

For the National Park Service, Grandfather Mountain was a problematic area from the earliest days of the Blue Ridge Parkway. While the entire parkway passed through the rugged terrain of the Appalachian Mountains, the section on Grandfather Mountain posed particularly challenging geographic problems. Grandfather's topography and geology meant the slopes of the mountain were generally rockier than surrounding areas and created difficulties in traditional cut and fill road construction techniques. In addition to these practical concerns, early in the process of mapping the Parkway officials determined the right of way purchased from the Linville Company in 1939 was unsuitable for their aesthetic vision for the scenic road.⁶ Providing an opportunity for substantial revision of the right of way, in 1944 the Federal government had an option to purchase the entire mountain, a prospect that made a large park on the site possible, and the Park Service drew up plans

⁶ Ibid.

reflecting this proposed purchase.⁷ Despite this opportunity, World War II and a lack of funding in the postwar budget delayed even minor construction, let alone the purchase of large tracts of land. The revised right of way plans remained in discussion, however, and the Park Service no longer considered the 1939 right of way an option.⁸ Increased attention to Section 2-H came from the Mission '66 initiative, a program to encourage completion of projects in time for the 50th anniversary of the National Park Service. With the Park Service newly focused on finishing the incomplete Blue Ridge Parkway, the negotiation for a new right of way became increasingly important. When the Park Service attempted to change the right of way, however, a battle began that would rage for more than a decade and deeply affect the way North Carolinians viewed both Hugh Morton and Grandfather Mountain.⁹

Anne Mitchell Whisnant's work remains the best scholarly narrative of the Blue Ridge Parkway on Grandfather Mountain. Carefully chronicling the scenic road's journey from Depression-era project to treasured national icon, Whisnant's careful analysis cut through many of the myths surrounding the road. Providing the central theme to the work, Whisnant found a partnership between the government and private tourism boosters served as the dominant feature of the Blue Ridge Parkway's creation. Highlighting how the Parkway's public-private partnership broke down at Grandfather Mountain, Whisnant used Hugh Morton as her signature example of a powerful landowner permanently altering the course of the national landmark.¹⁰

Whisnant highlights Morton's methods for delaying and eventually defeating the Park Service as an example of his influence and power with the state government and prominent

⁷ "Grandfather Mountain Master Plan," January 1, 1944, Lands Files, Blue Ridge Parkway Headquarters, Asheville, NC.

⁸ Whisnant, 266-268.

⁹ Whisnant, 263-325.

¹⁰ Ibid.

friends. Morton's public rhetoric created headaches for Park Service officials, but the stumbling block to the National Park Service on Grandfather Mountain was the reliance on the state government when acquiring land. Designed as a partnership between the state and Federal governments, state governments were expected to provide the right of way for the Parkway while the Federal government built the actual road and maintained it. This method placed the entire purchasing process in the hands of the states the Parkway passed through, a policy with important implications for Grandfather Mountain and its well-connected owner.¹¹

With the acquisition process firmly in state hands, the National Park Service was powerless to move forward with their plans to finish the Parkway unless the Highway Commission supported their efforts.¹² Moreover, as Hugh Morton's public profile grew in prominence and Grandfather's regional popularity as a tourist destination increased, the general population of North Carolina paid closer attention to what happened on the mountain.¹³ While the Parkway generally met with little organized opposition in the 1930s when it began acquiring its rights of way, some large landowners were able to deflect many of the negative impacts the Parkway might have on their holdings. In addition to this legacy of powerful landowners defying the Park Service, Whisnant argued Morton's bargaining position actually improved with the increased traffic through the Grandfather Mountain area as a result of the Blue Ridge Parkway exposing the property to a growing population of sympathetic North Carolina residents.¹⁴

¹¹ Whisnant, 123-24, 126-27.

¹² Whisnant, 123-24

¹³ "Converts a Mountain Into Money Maker" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 22, 1959; Dolores Jeffords, "New Lookout on the Blue Ridge Parkway" *New York Times*, October 11, 1953.

¹⁴ Newspapers as far afield as Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC ran stories outlining the routing controversy. "Blue Ridge Peak is Sought by U.S." *New York Times*, April 1, 1962; "Wirth Appears at Parkway Hearing," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 2, 1962. Whisnant also deals at length with previous landowner conflicts around the Parkway in *Super-Scenic Motorway*. Other than Hugh Morton, the most notable case is Heriot and Francis Clarkson at Little Switzerland. Whisnant, *Super-Scenic Motorway*, 4-5.

Finally, Whisnant explored how Morton utilized his business success to enhance his influence with state officials and prominent figures in North Carolina society with public gestures, including dedicating the Mile-High Bridge to former governor William Umstead. Morton served on prominent committees and boards across the state and sent letters requesting the support of Congressmen Charles Raper Jonas, President of the Blue Ridge Parkway Association Al Rachal, and North Carolina Governors Luther Hodges and Terry Sanford against the Park Service.¹⁵ Although some of his contacts were not fruitful, influence with members of North Carolina's political and business elite stalled the Park Service's efforts to secure the right of way and further exacerbated already troubled relations between Morton and the Park Service.¹⁶ Morton's personal charisma and connections ensured that his Grandfather Mountain property would not be treated like the rest of the land needed for the Parkway, yet his rhetoric differed considerably from other prominent landowners who resisted the Parkway. Casting his battle against the Parkway in a moral light and expertly utilizing the media, Morton effectively dominated the public routing conversation.¹⁷

Morton exposed his name and positive reputation to the general population of North Carolina through various committees and public causes, as well as using the growing popularity of Grandfather Mountain itself when he battled the National Park Service.¹⁸

¹⁵ Luther Hodges Correspondence, Charles Raper Jonas Papers, Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Correspondence between Morton and Rachal, BRPA Officers' Series, W.L Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

¹⁶ Morton to Charles Raper Jonas, March 8, 1962, Charles Raper Jonas Collection, Southern Historical Collection.

¹⁷ Whisnant, 156-177.

¹⁸ Grandfather Mountain's advertising campaigns tied Morton's personality to Grandfather in such an intrinsic way that most North Carolinians immediately associated Morton with Grandfather. The idea that Grandfather was a nature preserve placed Morton squarely in association with environmental causes and enhanced his standing as a defender of nature. Grandfather Mountain advertisements. BRPA Collection. W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Carol Grotnes Belk Library, Appalachian State University. Morton was also portrayed favorably in several newspapers throughout the country. "Blue Ridge Peak is Sought by U.S." *New*

Already a well-known North Carolinian, Morton's public record included decorations for bravery and a Purple Heart for his service as a combat photographer during World War II. Reflecting his friendships with prominent politicians, Morton served on the election campaign committees of two governors, chaired the North Carolina Tourism and Travel Commission, and lobbied successfully during the late 1950s to bring the USS North Carolina to Wilmington as a tourist attraction and museum.¹⁹ In addition to these official accolades, his photographic talent and camaraderie with the University of North Carolina Athletics department ensured that Morton had access to major events and his photos appeared in major state media outlets.²⁰ Especially during the 1960s, either Hugh Morton or his photographs appeared in newspapers weekly.

Whatever the role of the public in the eventual outcome of the routing battle, Whisnant leaves no doubt that personal contacts with state officials did much of the heavy procedural lifting that enabled Morton to court public support in the first place. Only once these procedural stops were in place could Morton turn his attention to the media and actively seek public favor, efforts that proved to have a much greater impact on the future of Grandfather Mountain than the friendships Morton enjoyed with powerful politicians.²¹ With the help of state officials secured and building on an already strong base of public support from his ownership of Grandfather Mountain, Morton turned the routing controversy into a statewide crusade against an encroaching Federal agency.

Providing the foundation for many of Morton's later advocacy campaigns, the strongest and most often repeated arguments against the new Blue Ridge Parkway routing

York Times, April 1, 1962; "Converts a Mountain Into Money Maker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 22, 1959.

¹⁹ *Biographical Conversations with Hugh Morton* (Raleigh, North Carolina: UNC-TV, 2001)

²⁰ Ron Green, "Gentle Morton Faces a Tough Battle: Father of Grandfather Mountain Stricken," *The Charlotte Observer*, February 13, 2006.

²¹ Whisnant, 263-325

came from Morton's assertion that a route higher on the mountain would adversely affect Grandfather's natural charm and beauty. These arguments served as the basis for Morton's later claims to benevolent stewardship of the mountain, and effectively challenged the Park Service's environmental authority. Avoiding any acknowledgement of their role in preserving other landscapes throughout the United States, Morton portrayed the National Park Service as unfairly forcing a private citizen into selling his beloved mountain and this portrayal gained considerable traction with newspapers in North Carolina. Later arguments emphasized the defacement and environmental degradation caused by a new route, but initial complaints from Morton illustrated how important private property rights were to the battle.²²

Reflecting his evolving argument, the environmental tone of Morton's public stance developed over the course of the routing battle, with only minor references to preserving the natural qualities of the mountain in his early comments. In a 1956 press release to the Asheville Citizen Morton highlighted how his family "conveyed...back in 1939 a right of way several miles long and 1000 feet wide" to the Park Service, a right of way he felt was sufficient.²³ Even more important to Morton than the land the government already owned, the Park Service proposed changing the route after his "extensive development of Grandfather Mountain as a scenic attraction," and the route "[came] a measured mile inside [Morton's] property line and would impair the natural beauty of Grandfather Mountain for all purposes except those of the Park Service."²⁴

Insinuating that the Park Service was taking land unnecessary to the success of the Parkway and casting natural beauty in terms of its economic function, Morton's early

²² Whisnant, 302-316; Hugh Morton, "A Capsule of Facts Substantiating Opposition to a Possible Change in the Established Right of Way for the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain." Lands Files, Blue Ridge Parkway Archives, Asheville, NC; Browning, "Report on Blue Ridge Parkway Section 2-H"; Jerry Shinn, "Death on the Blue Ridge," *The Charlotte Observer*, November 12, 1995.

²³ Hugh Morton, "Press Release," February 6, 1956, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection. Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

²⁴ Ibid.

arguments primarily pointed out the potential for damage to his tourist attraction. Even as it focused on property rights and economics, some comments in Morton's first press release foreshadowed the environmental arguments he would use with increasing frequency in the 1960s. The references to nature in this early language left little doubt as to Morton's motivations in fighting the Park Service, however. While harming the "natural beauty" seems at first glance to argue against the ecological degradation of the mountain, Morton couched even this reference to environmental damage in terms of economic development by noting how natural beauty had a distinct economic function that would be ruined "for all purposes except those of the Park Service."²⁵ This opening salvo in the battle over the Parkway was short and served only as a quick rebuttal to Park Service claims, but many of the same arguments used in this initial press release remained key tenets of Morton's complaints throughout the routing controversy.

The Park Service's initial response to Morton's comments seemed timid, despite their powerful arguments against the mountain's owner. While Morton's influence with the State Highway Commission blocked rulings unfavorable to him, it was a former State Highway Commission official that served as the foil to Morton's arguments against the Parkway rerouting. As the former Chief Locating Engineer for the State Highway Commission, R. Getty Browning personally routed much of the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina and was one of the main lobbyists for the Parkway to pass through the Grandfather Mountain area during initial routing debates in the 1930s. Indeed, Browning served as the hero of Whisnant's story and she found his impact on the Blue Ridge Parkway extending well beyond his initial role as locating engineer. More than just an engineer, Whisnant also outlined Browning's importance to the greater scenic integrity of the Parkway, furthering his

²⁵ Ibid.

status as National Park Service advocate during the routing controversy.²⁶

Immediately countering the Park Service's request for a new route, Morton sent his press release to North Carolina newspapers where his argument was typically cast as making "a lot of sense."²⁷ Echoing Morton's language and placing a similar emphasis on economics, newspaper articles asserted that the new Parkway route would "be destructive of his popular spot."²⁸ The article found the greater injustice in the routing was that "it [would] desecrate with deep gashes a mountain which is probably venerated more than any other in the State."²⁹ While the press release detailed the impact of the proposed routing on the Morton's attraction, the newspaper emphasized the threats to the "natural beauty" of Grandfather Mountain.

When examined in light of the later public arguments, these early complaints by Morton appear relatively tame.³⁰ With the release of his "Capsule of Facts Substantiating Opposition to a Possible Change in the Established Right of Way for the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain" to media outlets, Morton not only expanded the scope of his complaints but increased the volatility of his language as well.³¹ As one of the earliest and most detailed attempts at publicly defining his reasons for resisting the Park Service, Morton's "Capsule of Facts" served as foundational language for some of his later claims to environmental heroism.

Listing his objections to the Park Service's new routing proposal, Morton presented his argument in six short, well-reasoned points. Supplemented with photographs to further

²⁶ Whisnant, 59-62, 301-314.

²⁷ "A Battle in Defense of 'The Mountain,'" *Morganton News-Herald*, July 11, 1955.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Correspondence between Morton and Al Rachal, 1955, BRPA Officer's Series, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

³¹ Hugh Morton, "A Capsule of Facts Substantiating Opposition to a Possible Change in the Established Right of Way for the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain," Lands Files, Blue Ridge Parkway Archives, Asheville, NC.

emphasize his main concerns, Morton's "Capsule" primarily cited the difficulty of road construction on the mountain's slopes, the costly methods involved in building the road on Grandfather, and the possibility of damage to the mountain. Observing that the road he built to the summit could be used as an example of the trying conditions and including pictures of the blasting required to install the Mile High Bridge, Morton argued that the section over Grandfather Mountain would be the most expensive section of the Blue Ridge Parkway ever constructed. Furthermore, the construction was variously derided as "unsightly," would cause "incalculable damages," and was seen as "fantastically impractical."³² By highlighting the cost of construction and the damage to the very scenery the Parkway meant to showcase, Morton's "Capsule" attempted to deflect any of the arguments the Park Service might use in favor the higher route.

The assumptions that formed the basis of Morton's arguments reveal several flaws, but also provide clues to his reasoning and perspective. Grandfather Mountain's only human development came at the hands of Hugh Morton's tourist attraction. Using the mountain's sole development as an example of how damaging construction could be, Morton's evidence came from pictures of his own attraction and warned the Park Service officials that their road would be worse than his summit road. Indeed, the Park Service could have publically turned the argument on Morton and countered that the Mile High Bridge "changed the whole character of the mountain," especially when viewed from a distance.

Morton also argued that the Yonahlossee Trail featured "Parkway style" bridges, which would require only minor adaptations for Parkway traffic.³³ Again, the logic behind this argument reveals an attempt to maintain a right of way that would not harm the view

³²Ibid.

³³ Ibid. U.S. Highway 221 was occasionally still called The Yonahlossee Trail, the name given to the wagon road constructed by the Linville Company.

from Morton's mountain top attraction. The bridges were not built with the intention that they would carry the Parkway, and Morton's encouragement of straightening the existing roadbed of U.S. Highway 221 meant the entire road would need to be substantially reworked. Morton recognized this problem in his "Capsule," stating that the Yonahlossee Trail would need to be "reconditioned...with vistas opened up and non-essential curves removed," although he did not mention the bridges in this later comment.³⁴ Despite the damage reworking the road might cause to the landscape, the Yonahlossee roadbed was low enough on the mountain that it was not as visible from the Mile High Bridge as the Park Service proposed high route.

In other places, the "Capsule of Facts" offered insight to Morton's concerns, however. Cut and fill road construction, while the universal choice for constructing roads in the mountains, was singled out by Morton as a particularly damaging method, despite his using similar methods to build the road to his tourist mountaintop attraction. Addressing in one thought both the costs of road construction and the environmental damage the road would cause, Morton wrote the "most costly construction known to Blue Ridge road building would be a consequence of the higher route. It would produce an unsightly scar and change the whole face and character of North Carolina's most loved and respected mountain."³⁵ Accompanying this statement was a photo of a bulldozer pushing rocky soil during the construction of Morton's road to the summit. Morton's early arguments established a connection between the environmental and monetary costs of building a road across the mountain.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.



Figure 2: Constructing the Summit Road at Grandfather. Hugh Morton, “Capsule of Facts.”

Morton listed the impact of the proposed routing change on the economy of the area as a concern, illustrating his example with a photo of Grandfather Mountain’s full parking lot on a summer day. Drawing from the constant mentions of the economics involved, both Browning and Whisnant argue Morton’s real concerns with the Parkway’s change of routing were the possible impacts on his tourist attraction.³⁶ Morton never shied away from the fact that Grandfather Mountain was a for-profit business enterprise, yet imbedded in his language were simultaneous references to the mountain as a masterpiece and natural wonderland.

Sentences in the “Capsule of Facts” regularly conflated economic damage and increased cost with environmental degradation. The costs of changing the route, Morton argued, were “several hundreds of thousands of dollars and an unsightly gash that would change the whole face and character of [North Carolina’s] most beloved and respected

³⁶ Browning, “Report on Blue Ridge Parkway Section 2-H;” Whisnant, 316-318.

mountain.”³⁷ Combining dollar values with less tangible “natural values”, Morton also cited the possibility of “incalculable damages to existing business enterprises, not to mention the harm to abundant shrubbery and growing timber.”³⁸ While his language in the Parkway battle grew hyperbolic with his invocations of natural preservation and characterization of Grandfather Mountain as a masterpiece, Morton acknowledged in both his “Capsule of Facts” and other public comments that one of his considerations was the affect the new routing might have on his business.³⁹ Whatever his actual concerns, the majority of the arguments expressed in his “Capsule of Facts” partially addressed environmental issues, furthering his claims to be looking out for the mountain’s best interests. Morton’s language, while biased, clearly attempted to place Grandfather Mountain’s owner on both the moral and legal high ground, yet R. Getty Browning’s response would call into question all of Morton’s legal arguments and most of his environmental claims.

In his “Report on Section 2-H,” Browning carefully picked apart Morton’s “Capsule of Facts,” addressing each point Morton made with substantial documentation and reasoned counterarguments. Browning’s service as Chief Locating Engineer would have lent credibility to his words if the public knew of his critiques, but Browning’s report was not widely published. This failure to confront the environmental arguments hampered National Park Service efforts against Morton. From a historical perspective it is clear the lack of an effective challenge from the Park Service allowed Morton’s rhetoric to become a dominant part of the public conversation and that this failure enabled him to determine how the general public viewed Grandfather Mountain.

³⁷ Morton, “Capsule of Facts”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Morton, “Capsule of Facts”; “A Battle in Defense of ‘The Mountain,’” *Morganton News-Herald*, July 11, 1955; Correspondence between Morton and Al Rachal, 1955, BRPA Officer’s Series, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

Morton's rhetorical victory and later environmental mantle is especially striking when reading some of Browning's most pointed criticisms of Morton in the "Report on Section 2-H." While Morton's "Capsule of Facts" spanned eight pages and consisted primarily of photographs, Browning's response was sixteen pages of carefully worded text. Debunking Morton's concerns one by one, Browning's opening line snipes at Morton by saying the routing of Section 2-H required, and was given, "a great deal of careful study," referencing Morton's characterization that the rerouting was a whim and the result of bureaucratic self-importance.⁴⁰

The "Report on Section 2-H" wasted no time in detailing the flaws with Morton's complaints. Browning called Morton's representation of the situation misleading, proposed that Morton misunderstood previous agreements between the Linville Company and the Park Service, and accused Morton of ignoring the facts involved in routing the Parkway over the mountain. While Browning's response is worded strongly, the aggressive tone is no doubt in response to the bold previous accusations by Morton. The "Capsule" wording, especially in relation to the reasons for changing the right of way, implies the Park Service changing the right of way was a "costly monument to a whim and would serve no useful purpose."⁴¹ Browning's report categorically denied this accusation, outlining the careful thought process that produced the revised right of way plan, saying "the determination of a suitable route for this section of the Blue Ridge Parkway...has required, and has been given a great deal of study."⁴² Going on to argue against Morton's assertion that the existing right of way would serve the Parkway's needs, Browning wrote: "the...statement that the Yonahlossee Trail offers 'the best and most logical route around Grandfather' is simply not supported by the

⁴⁰ Browning, "Report on Blue Ridge Parkway Section 2-H"

⁴¹ Morton, "Capsule of Facts"

⁴² Browning, "Report on Blue Ridge Parkway Section 2-H"

facts.”⁴³ These opening lines of the document easily countered some of Morton’s arguments, but Browning saved his most damning critiques for the end of the report.

Here he dealt directly with Morton’s claim that the Parkway would have necessitated blasting through rocky terrain, thereby permanently damaging the mountain’s ecosystem and drastically altering the terrain. Browning not only stated the fact that the proposed high route was more ecologically friendly than any other option, he also attacked Morton’s earlier practices on the mountain when building the toll-road to the summit and the swinging bridge.⁴⁴ Morton’s own “Capsule” published a picture of the blasting for the Mile-High Bridge and used photos of building the toll road as an example of the damaging methods used for constructing mountain roads. Browning’s simple, yet biting response to this was “We do not think the example set in the construction of the toll road should be followed by Parkway engineers.”⁴⁵

According to Whisnant, Browning represented a voice of reason to Morton’s claims of ecological sensitivity and demonstrated the irony of Morton’s nascent environmentalist reputation. While Morton employed rhetoric that cast Grandfather Mountain as an Appalachian wilderness in need of saving, Browning correctly pointed out that Morton damaged the mountain when he developed it for tourism. With scientific evidence and logical conclusions, Browning offers compelling and practically irrefutable arguments on paper. As she tore down Morton’s environmental persona, Whisnant failed to emphasize the importance of the *novelty* of Morton’s ecological argument. Well before the formation of the modern environmental movement in the 1970s, Morton tapped into a public sentiment that already identified Grandfather Mountain as a special place worth protecting and parlayed that

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Morton, “A Capsule of Facts”

sentiment into years of public goodwill.

The rhetorical battle between Morton and the Park Service created Morton's first struggle for a favorable public reputation. The shift in public opinion falls into sharp relief when comparing newspaper articles from Grandfather's opening in the late 1950s and early 1960s to those at the height of the Parkway routing controversy in the late 1960s. Before the Parkway routing, Grandfather Mountain was merely a business attraction on the peak of a particularly interesting Appalachian mountain. After the Parkway routing battle, Grandfather was an immediately recognizable symbol and a public victory for its owner Hugh Morton. Whether or not it was true, the public perceived Grandfather Mountain differently after Morton's fight with the Park Service, and this new perception affected how visitors viewed the mountain and its owner for decades.⁴⁶

More than just arguing over the routing, the rhetoric each side used highlighted some of the contradictions inherent in mid-twentieth century discussions of nature. On the surface, the two goals of preserving the scenic beauty of a place and developing it as a tourist attraction seem at odds. Any development of an area necessarily destroys some of its previous ecology, yet the arguments utilized by both Morton and Browning demonstrate how difficult Americans found the exercise of defining nature and the appropriate use of those natural resources. The dialogue between Morton and the Park Service came at a time when conceptions of nature and how to protect it were changing.

While the Park Service saw their use of a new right of way on Grandfather Mountain in terms of expanding the public's ability to appreciate the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Hugh Morton offered a compelling argument against any further road building on a mountain recognized for its natural qualities. Whisnant argued this argument remained

⁴⁶ "Converts a Mountain into a Moneymaker," *The Chicago Tribune*, September 22, 1959; "Magical Mountain," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1962; "Blue Ridge Peak Sought by U.S.," *The New York Times*, April 1, 1962.

rooted in Morton's concerns for his business, but whether Morton's arguments accurately reflected his personal views was immaterial to the public's perception. Each side utilized ecological and environmental preservation for its own particular perspective and played to the conflicted nature of America's conceptions of nature at the time. While neither Morton nor the National Park Service planned to fully cease developing Grandfather in the 1950s, the importance of environmental preservation in addition to the *scenic* beauty of the landscape figured prominently in both arguments.

Whisnant's *Super Scenic Motorway* acknowledges the importance of Morton's public posturing in the routing controversy's outcome, but she does not explore its implications for defining nature. Whisnant's history offered an airtight political explanation for the resolution of the routing debate, but beyond the political battle and its immediate outcomes was Morton's insistence that he held the moral high ground. Morton's official emphasis on Grandfather Mountain's "pristine" character and idyllic landscape reinforced his advertising campaigns, and the mountain was billed to the public as more than just a scenic attraction. Grandfather Mountain was a natural wonder available to the common man, an appeal that mirrored the very National Park Service Morton fought. Every public appearance to fight the Park Service doubled as a branding opportunity for Morton and gave him the chance to emphasize how naturally spectacular Grandfather Mountain was and how Morton himself was the best steward of the peak. A battle that began as Morton's fight to prevent the Park Service from taking more land and endangering his tourism business rapidly became a noble fight against nefarious forces determined to ruin the mountain.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Morton, "Events Relating Directly and Indirectly to the Construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain, North Carolina, 1889-1962," BRPA Records, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection; Letter from Charles Raper Jonas March 28, 1962; Morton to Jonas, March 8, 1962; Correspondence between Morton and Jonas, May 1962, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

While Morton's conservationist credentials were open to question, attacking Hugh Morton's credibility turned out to be a poor strategy for the Park Service. Morton employed his friends in the state government to help him find an acceptable resolution to the routing. Morton wrote letters to notable state figures Francis Clarkson, Representative Charles Raper Jonas, and James Broyhill. Morton was also a member of the Blue Ridge Parkway Association, a sort of Parkway-focused Chamber of Commerce and Business Association, and enlisted fellow members' help in lobbying the state government for a solution to the routing that favored Grandfather Mountain.⁴⁸

A good example of this lobbying was Morton's brief outline regarding the history of the Linville Company and Grandfather Mountain's relationship with the National Park Service, which he enclosed in many of his letters. Listing events by year and importance (as determined by Morton), this timeline gave the impression that both the Linville Company and Hugh Morton were always excellent stewards of the land and that the National Park Service was perennially land hungry and forceful.⁴⁹ Far from historically accurate, Morton's timeline further contributed to a growing statewide consensus that he was the best steward of the mountain. With no mention of the negative aspects of the Linville Company's ownership of Grandfather and a celebratory telling of Morton's development efforts, the timeline cast the mountain as currently in the best hands possible and the Park Service as meddlesome, arrogant, and power hungry. Morton also used photography to promote Grandfather Mountain as a place where visitors could encounter wilderness, with the notion of untamed

⁴⁸ Letter to James Broyhill February 8, 1973, Letter to Charles Whitley April 22, 1985, Letter to Al Rachal February 13, 1956 and response. Morton, "Events Relating Directly and Indirectly to the Construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain, North Carolina, 1889-1962," BRPA Records, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Carol Grotnes Belk Library, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina. Letter from Charles Raper Jonas March 28, 1962, Morton to Jonas, March 8, 1962, Correspondence between Morton and Jonas, May 1962, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

nature helping his attempts to cast the mountain as a place that did not deserve to be conquered. While both Morton's language and his photography from this period reflect the emphasis on scenery, these efforts were in keeping with the nascent environmental movement of the period. As promoter of Grandfather, Morton benefited from encouraging the public to view the mountain as a majestic peak that needed saving.

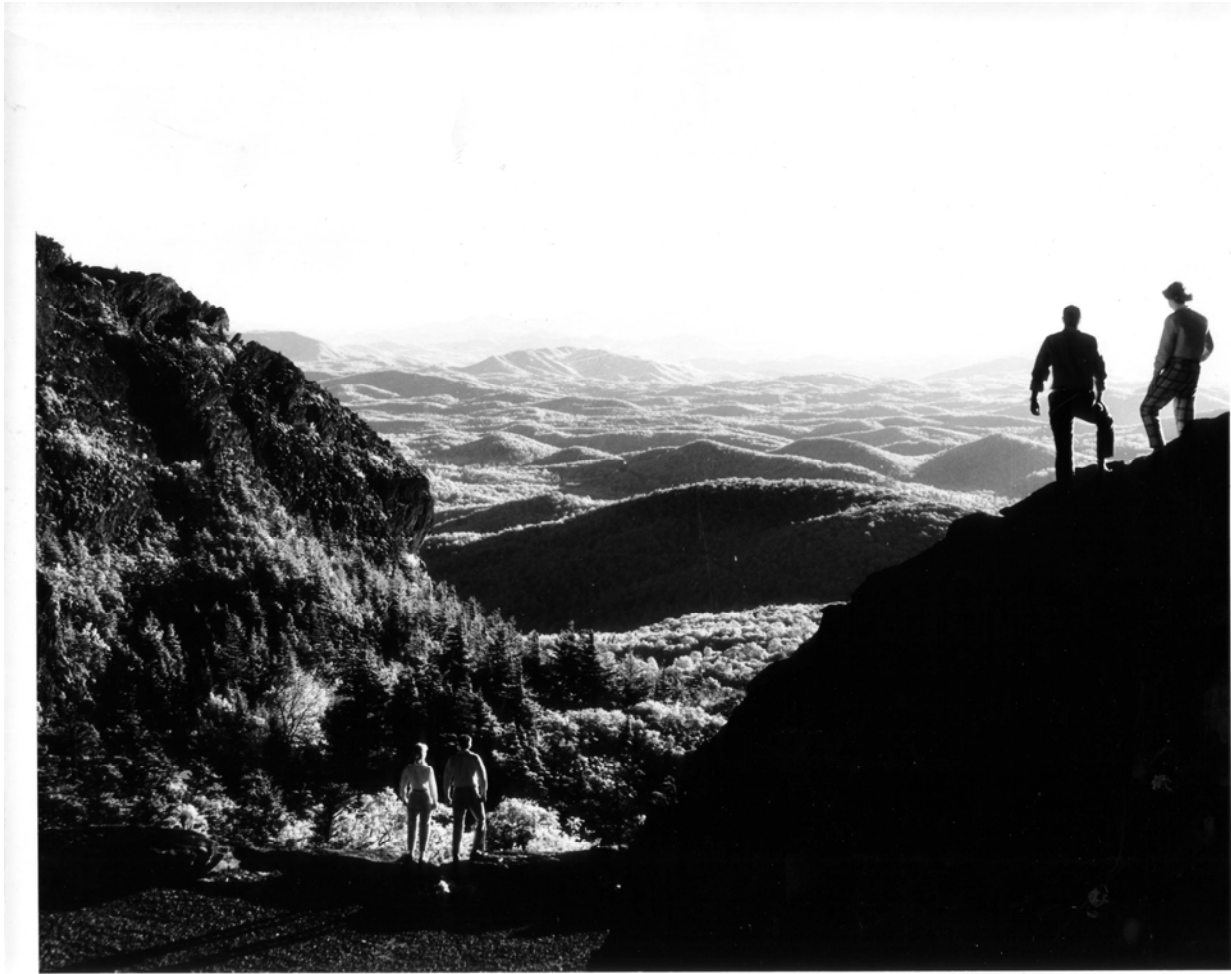


Figure 3: View from Grandfather Mountain, BRPA Publicity Pack, BRPA Officers' Series, W.L. Eury
Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

While promoting the mountain to the general public as a place of natural beauty and wonder, Morton also increased the volatility of his language when soliciting support from his

allies. In the letters he mailed to friends, Morton outlined how in 1944 an option was given, “by [the] Linville Company to Harlan P. Kelsey, private citizen representing National Park Service, to purchase Grandfather Mountain.” The confrontational nature of Morton’s language intensified as he considered the recent filing of condemnation papers by R. Getty Browning. “Action by Browning apparently is move by Park Service to grab land they thought they would own when Kelsey had option to purchase mountain in 1944-46, and instead of using route plans agreed on in 1939 use the second set of plans apparently formulated by Park Service when they thought they were going to own the whole mountain, which they do not.”⁵⁰

Referencing a time when Grandfather Mountain was for sale and seeing the Park Service as perhaps upset about their misfortune at not purchasing the whole mountain, Morton’ assumed the worst of the Park Service actions. Whisnant’s *Super-Scenic Motorway* detailed an earlier confrontation between landowner Francis Clarkson over the Blue Ridge Parkway routing, but for Whisnant the example of Hugh Morton served to demonstrate the power of a landowner to completely turn the Parkway to his own purposes. Indeed in Morton’s instance, the Parkway itself served as a useful conduit for visitors arriving at Grandfather.

Seeking support from powerful friends, Morton distributed his overly simplified and heavily biased timeline and “Capsule of Facts” with letters he sent attempting to explain his perspective on the controversy. His one-sided interpretations of events compounded the problem for the Park Service of Browning’s scathing report not seeing the light of day, and increased the perceived veracity of Morton’s story. For many of these powerful friends, the

⁵⁰ Hugh Morton, “Events Relating Directly and Indirectly to the Construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain, North Carolina, 1889-1962,” In letter between Al Rachal and Hugh Morton, BRPA Officers’ Series, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

history provided by Morton often was the most detailed information they encountered regarding the Parkway routing. Charles Raper Jonas mentioned he had no idea there was a long battle over the Parkway routing and Morton cast the conversation about the Parkway as having roots extending back to the turn of the century. Without a strong response by the National Park Service, the arguments in favor of Morton's point of view filled the vacuum of knowledge on the issue.⁵¹

As the routing battle raged, visitors to Grandfather Mountain also provided a captive audience that was largely uninformed but electorally powerful and very fond of the mountain and by extension its owner.⁵² Morton effectively cast the Park Service in a poor light even though no policies changed and the Parkway officials were following the proper land acquisition methods they had always used. Unable to mount a comparable public campaign, the Park Service, defaced and defeated, was powerless to force its will on Morton or his mountain.

Morton won the routing battle with more than his manufactured environmental credentials, however. Whisnant argues the National Park Service greatly helped Morton by their ineffective campaign and public blunders. There was the possibility that all Morton's positive publicity might have been undone with the publication of R. Getty Browning's report. As it was, Browning's report was not published widely, nor was it even distributed outside the State Highway Commission, and the critiques of Morton's "Capsule of Facts" were not a part of the public conversation. Hugh Morton's domination of the debate continued, as did his ability to shape public perception of Grandfather Mountain and manufacture his own environmentalist credentials.

⁵¹ Correspondence between Al Rachal and Hugh Morton, 1962, BRPA Officers' Series, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

⁵² Correspondence between Mrs. E.S. Collins to Representative Charles Raper Jonas, March 1962, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Whisnant's work argues little harm would come to the mountain itself under the "high route," but this chapter demonstrates that the *ecological* impact of the Blue Ridge Parkway was never why Morton fought the National Park Service. In the case of the Parkway, any of the routes resulted in substantial alteration of Grandfather Mountain's landscape.⁵³ Ironically, despite Morton's overblown claims to moral superiority, the eventual compromise routing proved beneficial for the mountain's wildlife. Many years after the resolution of the routing controversy scientists discovered rare bats near a proposed tunnel along the discarded high route.⁵⁴ The rerouting of the Parkway resulted in ecological benefits, but these benefits came out of Morton's businessman approach and desire to improve the position of his tourist attraction, not special knowledge of the environmental consequences. That Morton's preferred route resulted in an ecologically desirable outcome only served to bolster his revisionist story of the Parkway battle in later years.

Whisnant characterizes the end of the Parkway routing controversy as Morton simply outlasting the Park Service. Blue Ridge Parkway superintendent Conrad Wirth resigned in 1963, still unable to convince the Highway Commission or state government, who remained sympathetic to Morton. Following Wirth's resignation, new superintendent Granville Liles quickly agreed to the compromise middle route.⁵⁵ Once again, Morton's public relations savvy played a role in how the resolution appeared to the public. Far from a stubborn private businessman who effectively used personal connections in the government to bend a Federal agency to his will, Morton instead cast the middle route as a generous gift to the Parkway.⁵⁶

⁵³ Browning, "Report on Section 2-H"

⁵⁴ "Mountaintop Land Saved," *Greensboro News & Record*, Saturday, February 16, 1991; "Grandfather Mountain Land Gains Protection," *The Raleigh News and Observer*, Friday, February 15, 1991.

⁵⁵ Whisnant, *Super-Scenic Motorway*, 308-310

⁵⁶ As of 2008, this language is still used by Grandfather Mountain personnel. Correspondence between Granville Liles and Hugh Morton, 1968, BRPA Officer's Series, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

As a symbol of the newfound goodwill between the two parties, a groundbreaking ceremony was held in 1968 on Grandfather Mountain to celebrate the resolution of the routing controversy and a reception was held at Grandfather Mountain's skyscraper lounge. With the matter finally resolved, Morton encouraged burying the past arguments and keeping the affair as civil as possible.⁵⁷ Granville Liles, Parkway superintendent, was in attendance at the groundbreaking as were Hugh Morton and Representative James Broyhill. With attendees joking around, smiling for pictures, and enjoying the summer weather, the festivities of 1968 were a far cry from the heated public arguments of the previous decade.

The mere absence of Conrad Wirth may have been one of the reasons for the change of tone. Morton did not trust Wirth, as shown by Morton's letters casting Wirth as a sneaky bureaucrat and calling him a "tricky operator."⁵⁸ In addition to Wirth's absence and Morton's role as host of the groundbreaking, Grandfather Mountain's owner appeared to honestly believe he held the moral high ground and was justified in his victory. Whatever the personal reasons for the smiling faces on that afternoon in 1968, it was clear the routing controversy was over. Morton's arguments casting the mountain as a unique natural place, formulated in response to the Park Service's attempts to reroute the Parkway, served to elevate the standing of both Hugh Morton and his attraction. Grandfather Mountain, according to an evolving public perception, was no longer just a scenic place, it was a natural and wild place that needed preservation. Almost universally, the media depicted Hugh Morton as the best steward for this iconic American landmark, a trend that continued throughout the rest of the twentieth century.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Correspondence between Morton and Charles Raper Jonas, 1962. 4528, Charles Raper Jonas Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

⁵⁹ James Hunter, "Hugh Morton and Mildred, King and Queen of the Mountain," *Chicago Tribune*, June 29, 1986; Bruce Henderson, "Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue

The triumph of environmental preservationist language and the perceived victory for the *natural* masterpiece of Grandfather Mountain in 1968 came at a time of great change in American's conceptions of wilderness and nature. Hugh Morton, a man whose victory over the Park Service was portrayed as a triumph of a friend to the mountain, would serve as both an environmental leader and a perceived despoiler in the years following his routing victory. How Morton's actions appeared in the media during the latter part of the twentieth century offer insight into both the humanity of Grandfather Mountain's owner and the changing conceptions of environmental protection.

CHAPTER 3

“She Was Just Synonymous With The Mountain”: Mildred the Bear, Animal Enclosures, and Definitions of Wilderness

“You know, the forest service had Smokey the Bear. . . . They tell me he was very grumpy and hard to get along with. We’re just glad our mascot was just as nice as she could be.”

-Hugh Morton, 1993

“Mildred the bear...meant Grandfather Mountain to many people.”

-Charlotte Observer Obituary

Morton’s fight against the Parkway came at a critical moment in the awakening of an American environmental consciousness. While an appreciation of nature had existed in the United States since transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau “went to the woods to live deliberately,” during the early twentieth century fundamental shifts in the way Americans thought about nature had serious implications for both landscapes and people. Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, the Progressive Movement’s desire for livable spaces, and the development of the western National Parks demonstrated early American attempts at environmental preservation and an American preoccupation with nature. These political and bureaucratic changes reflected deeper trends within American society, and as the nation prospered after World War II a wider concern for humanity’s place in nature emerged.

The 1950s marked a shift in American conceptions of nature. Americans found themselves wealthier and better able to embrace a sanitized version of the rustic environment that supposedly characterized their past. Suburbs served as one example of this desire for a partial move to a rural lifestyle, but with an increase in automobile ownership, Americans were able to travel and participate in a simulated frontier environment through the National

Park System. Camping, fishing, and mountaineering were some of the ways suburban tourists could recreate the frontier experience, and attractions ranging from the federally owned National Parks to private tourist traps attempted to tap this growing desire for a connection to a lost past.¹

An increasingly sanitized American home life and the creature comforts that became widely available in the 1950s contrasted with the planned rustic feel of places like the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Fitting within these larger trends, Grandfather Mountain also represents the changing attitudes of Americans towards natural places. With Hugh Morton at the helm, Grandfather Mountain evolved from a scenic overlook to eventually take its place in the minds of visitors amongst these government-sponsored preserves.² While Grandfather never completely imitated the National Park Service, portraying the mountain as a park allowed all the advantages of public recognition and support with minimal changes to how the attraction actually functioned. When Grandfather Mountain tapped the power of the National Park “brand,” it ensured the mountain’s immediate identification with the rustic and rural ideal that characterized National Parks.³ As Grandfather Mountain increasingly identified itself as a park-like space and with growing popular sentiment in favor of the mountain, a bizarre paradox emerged.

Grandfather Mountain was a privately owned and operated for-profit business, yet as early as

¹ Ted Steinberg, *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* (New York: W W Norton & Co Inc, 2007); Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002); David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness: Cars, Roads, and Nature in Washington’s National Parks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South*; Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*.

² In addition to his comments in *Biographical Conversations*, videocassette, (Raleigh, NC: UNC-TV, 2001), Morton frequently cited his development tendencies in other interviews, such as *Carolina Preserves*, videocassette, (Raleigh, NC: UNC-TV, 2001)

³ Timothy Silver, *Mt. Mitchell and The Black Mountains: An Environmental History of the Highest Peaks in Eastern America*. Silver deals with the idea of “parkitecture” and the distinctive designs employed by state and national parks. For other treatments, see John C. Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks*; John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History*; and Kathy S. Mason, *Natural Museums: U.S. National Parks, 1872-1916*.

the 1960s Morton tapped into the public goodwill towards parks and readily identified the mountain with public service.

Concurrent with Morton's victory over the Park Service, the concept of a protected and managed wilderness gained increasing national attention. Particularly after the passing of the 1964 Wilderness Act, the concept of permanently keeping certain tracts of land safe from human development grew popular with the general public.⁴ Grandfather Mountain's advertising fit this trend with Morton's public comments and increasingly cast the mountain as an *ecological* enclave. While many of the other owners of tourist attractions in western North Carolina continued to sell the scenic beauty of their sites, by the early 1960s Grandfather regularly touted the mountain's wilderness qualities, which made it unusual amongst its private competitors.⁵ At first the language of environmental preservation served Morton's battle against the Park Service, but by the 1960s the unique environment and geography of Grandfather Mountain that for centuries served only as an obstacle to visitors became one of the main reasons to visit the peak. Indeed, Grandfather Mountain's advertisements reflect changes in the attractions on the mountain as well as the evolution of a national environmental consciousness.⁶

Diversifying Grandfather Mountain's appeal made good business sense. The new focus on the environment, combined with seasonal attractions away from the peak such as the Highland Games and Singing on the Mountain, connected people to Grandfather in a more permanent way than scenery alone. While the view from Linville peak was impressive, Morton attempted to create an attraction throughout the 1960s that offered tourists more than

⁴ Michael Lewis, *American Wilderness: A New History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4-12.

⁵ Christus Gardens, Chimney Rock, and other attractions exhibited the beauty of the mountains but paid no homage to an environmentalist cause. BRPA Archives, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

⁶ Grandfather Promotion Material, BRPA Archives, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection.

one reason to visit. In addition to attracting more tourists, through visitor participation these other attractions also encouraged a lasting emotional connection to the mountain. Starting as a small celebration of Scottish culture, the Highland Games grew until they became a regional attraction that drew people from throughout the Southeast and eventually gained international attention.⁷ Hosting these other events at McRae Meadows near the base of Grandfather Mountain and well away from the ecologically fragile slopes, the supplemental attractions were not environmentally controversial and created a stable group of tourists who visited Grandfather Mountain every year.⁸ With the Highland Games, Singing on the Mountain, and the Mile High Bride well established, Morton started focusing on expanding the natural appeal of his attractions in the late 1950s.

Morton's first step in increasing the mountain's "wilderness appeal" was an attempt to release a breeding pair of black bears. According to popular accounts, the staff at Grandfather Mountain released a male bear into the wild a few weeks before they planned to release the female. The male immediately disappeared into the woods and was never seen again. Grandfather Mountain's staff kept the comparatively docile female bear captive for a few more weeks for the planned filming of a television show, intending to record her release. When they eventually released her for filming, the bear stayed around the crew and seemed hesitant to leave. The television crew dubbed the bear "Mildred," and when they left at the end of the day the bear was still at the clearing. Later that week, Mildred appeared in populated areas near the mountain and scared local residents, prompting calls to North Carolina wildlife officials. After determining the animal scaring people in Linville was the same one Morton released on the mountain, wildlife officials returned her to her cage at

⁷ "North Carolina Stands in for Scotland during 'The Games,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, July 1, 1986.

⁸ James Kilpatrick, "Flags, Scots, a Ticking Clock on a Mountain," *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1978; Dolores Jeffords, "Highlands at Home," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1957.

Grandfather Mountain where she became something of a pet to Morton.⁹

From this coincidental adoption of Mildred, Morton built a new attraction that included an amphitheater and a special enclosure for the bear and her future offspring. Building on this initial enclosure, Morton further expanded his attractions to include animal habitats, hiking trails, a natural history museum, two large parking areas, scenic overlooks, and an undeveloped “backcountry” where visitors could encounter supposedly untamed nature. Part of the complexity of distilling Morton’s motives stems from how Grandfather Mountain was emblematic of the growth of environmental tourism in the middle of the twentieth century and the many paradoxes of the tourism industry. Early environmental tourism advertised wilderness and docile wildlife in the same breath, ignoring the irony of “tame” wildlife and creating “wilderness” where before there was none.¹⁰ Mildred represented Morton’s shift towards emphasizing his attractions’ wilderness qualities, but her role in Grandfather Mountain’s future extended well beyond her purpose as a centerpiece for animal exhibits.

Mildred came to Grandfather Mountain as a juvenile black bear with the intention of establishing a wild breeding population on the mountain and yet she served as the foundation for Morton’s animal exhibits and subsequent advertising campaigns. The story of Mildred’s arrival also served as a favorite of Morton’s for public occasions. Morton first exhibited Mildred in a roadside amphitheater and kept her in a temporary enclosure, but in the 1970s Morton expanded the role of his animal attraction by adding a bear habitat very similar to

⁹ Catherine Morton, *Grandfather Mountain*, Southeastern North Carolina Collection, Randall Library, University of North Carolina-Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁰ An illustration of the role of experts in the creation and definition of wilderness can be found in Benjamin Johnson, “Wilderness Parks and Their Discontents,” in *American History: A New Wilderness*, edited by Michael Lews (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

those utilized in larger zoos of the time.¹¹ It was discovered that Mildred was something of an office pet to the staff at the Atlanta zoo when she was a cub, which partially explained her affinity for human company.¹²

Adopted as the mountain's mascot, the bear rapidly became one of the iconic images of Grandfather Mountain, and was featured on advertisements, posed for promotional photos, and toured the state with Morton.¹³ Mildred's role in Grandfather Mountain's history represents Morton's combination of calculated business sense and ideological claims to environmental conservation. An important part of Grandfather Mountain's public profile and public image, Mildred served as entertainment on the mountain itself. Offering the public the "friendliest bear there ever was," the Mile High bridge, and walking trails, Grandfather Mountain was a tourist destination that offered visitors multiple sanitized environments where they could interact with a safe version of nature.¹⁴

Despite the initial intention of Mildred serving as a truly wild bear in the backcountry of Grandfather, her actual service represented a compromise between encountering real wilderness conditions and interacting with a domesticated version of wildlife that reinforced man's place as the master of nature. While her species qualified her as wildlife according to popular convention, Morton's easygoing bear provided both the thrill of seeing a potentially dangerous animal and the immediate reassurance that nature remained safely contained and even friendly towards humans. Those who never encountered nature on any greater level than watching Mildred interact with her handler might come away with reinforced notions of nature as tamed and bettered by its interactions with people. An obituary summarized the

¹¹ Personal interview with Catherine Morton, 2008

¹² Catherine Morton, *Grandfather Mountain*.

¹³ Lisa Pollock, "Mountain Feels Bleak without Its Mildred," *The Charlotte Observer*, January 8, 1993.

¹⁴ Catherine Morton, *Grandfather Mountain*.

anthropomorphization of Mildred when it found, “it seems like her mourners think of Mildred as more human than bear.” For visitors, the bear represented nature even as she simultaneously demonstrated man’s dominance of wilderness and nature’s friendliness to humans.

As the public face of Grandfather Mountain and its “wild” environment, Mildred also purposefully tapped a growing yearning for the supposedly vanishing wild America in Morton’s promotions. Riding the wave of positive public sentiment towards natural areas, Morton actively cultivated a “wilderness” image for his attraction, and Grandfather Mountain began to assume a place in the collective mind of North Carolinians as an environmental enclave rather than simply a glorified scenic overlook.¹⁵ While the spectacular views remained an important draw, in the 1960s Morton’s advertising shifted from focusing solely on Grandfather Mountain’s scenic qualities to its expanding role as a wildlife and nature preserve. As the battle over the Parkway routing raged, Grandfather Mountain changed as a tourist destination to increasingly reflect the rhetoric Morton used in combating the National Park Service. Morton’s advertisements, rhetoric, and public posturing reflected tangible developments in the character of the mountain’s attractions. What began as a scenic overlook with a parking lot in the 1950s evolved into a private park that garnered national attention for its environmental qualities by the late 1960s.¹⁶

The tradition of featuring animals at the mountain that started with Morton’s adoption of Mildred the Bear in the 1960s formed a cornerstone of Grandfather Mountain’s appeal throughout the late twentieth century. The growing animal habitats offer competing visions

¹⁵ The phrase “wilderness qualities” appears throughout Morton’s correspondence and comments. See especially “Short History of the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain,” BRPA Records, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Carol Grotnes Belk Library Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

¹⁶ “Hugh Morton and Mildred King and Queen of the Mountain,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 26, 1986.

of whether Grandfather Mountain was a crass tourist attraction that simply supplemented its appeal with modern equivalents of bear shows, or an environmentally conscious attempt to exhibit animals no longer roaming free on the mountain and establish breeding pairs of endangered species.

Morton included in his attraction's animal collection several species that Grandfather Mountain no longer supported in the wild. Morton's animal enclosures expanded during the 1970s to include several more black bears, cougars, eagles, and white-tailed deer.¹⁷

Catherine Morton credited the introduction of cougars on the mountain to an eccentric visitor's donation of his pet cougar kitten and her father's wish to have another species in addition to black bears.¹⁸ While at one time cougars roamed Grandfather Mountain in the wild, they remain endangered in the eastern United States and were no longer found on the mountain in the twentieth century. Emblematic of the species' decline, the Florida everglades supported the only wild breeding population east of the Mississippi in the 1970s. For an animal that was once native to the entire eastern United States, the exhibition of cougars at Grandfather represented the only opportunity for many visitors to see a living specimen. When given the opportunity to own a cougar, Morton gladly accepted the animal into his growing menagerie, thinking it would help draw visitors and contribute to his attraction's wilderness appeal.¹⁹

Injured eagles were the next animals introduced at Grandfather Mountain, with both golden and bald eagles featured. These birds came to the mountain after experiencing harm

¹⁷ Catherine Morton, *Grandfather Mountain*.

¹⁸ Personal Interview with Catherine Morton, 2008.

¹⁹ Gene Bell, "Father of Grandfather Mountain," *The Miami Herald*. April 1, 1984; Personal Interview with Catherine Morton, 2008.

at the hands of humans and usually only remained at the mountain long enough to heal and return to the wild. While the animal habitats served as rehabilitation centers, several permanent pairs of eagles whose injuries prevented their release lived at Grandfather for decades. Grandfather cycled through several eagles throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with only a handful of permanent residents. While the majestic birds served as a draw to tourists, the mountain's status as a rehabilitation center also furthered Morton's claims to ecological sensitivity.²⁰

In addition to rehabilitating animals, Morton attempted to reintroduce golden eagles in the wild at the peak and used his animal habitats as a breeding ground. An injured female golden eagle named "Goldie" was the subject of close attention during the winter of 1988. "Nature lovers [were] counting on her to bring the golden eagle back to North Carolina."²¹ Fighting high winds, cold temperatures, and predicted snow, Grandfather Mountain employees "kept their eyes glued to Goldie," and "park officials [had] an incubator standing by" in the event she left the nest unattended. While emphasizing the role of Grandfather Mountain in the conservation of a locally endangered species, this article also illustrates the common conflation of Grandfather Mountain with national parks by referring to paid Grandfather Mountain staff as "park officials."²² Ultimately, the breeding program was not successful, but Morton's attempt at reintroducing the golden eagle garnered high praise from environmentalists throughout the state.²³ While the breeding programs proved unsuccessful, Morton took advantage of the publicity his animals provided and advertised his contributions

²⁰ Jay Clarke, "On Grandfather Mountain, Things Change for the Better," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 2, 1992; Scott Nicholson, "Bald Eagles Make a Comeback," *The Mountain Times*, July 7, 2005.

²¹ Diane Suchetka, "Undaunted Mother Eagle Stays with Nest," *The Charlotte Observer*, March 22, 1998.

²² Catherine Morton, *Grandfather Mountain*; Diane Suchetka, "Undaunted Mother Eagle Stays with Nest," *The Charlotte Observer*, March 22, 1998.

²³ Regina Clark, "Hope Wanes for Birth of Eaglet," *The Charlotte News and Observer*, May 1, 1988.

to conservation. With growing rehabilitation and breeding programs, beautiful scenery, and diverse natural flora, tourists increasingly associated Grandfather Mountain with Federally managed national parks.²⁴

Indeed, many of the activities surrounding the animal habitats at Grandfather merited identification with other environmentally beneficial parks. The animal habitats and enclosures on the mountain served as both a constructed human addition to the mountain's profitable attractions and as a legitimate vehicle for environmental preservation. While the early history of Mildred's time at Grandfather Mountain seems far from what twenty-first century Americans might consider an appropriate way to treat a wild animal, as Morton expanded both his animal habitats on the mountain and the importance placed on Mildred in promotional material, he displayed a greater sensitivity towards the needs of the animals. Whether this sensitivity was motivated by Morton's business interests or an actual desire to improve the ecology of the area, the source of Morton's motivation was immaterial to the positive results produced. Tourists came to see bear cubs and eaglets, but these animals also contributed to the establishment of further breeding populations. While cougars and otters remained absent from Grandfather's slopes outside the managed enclosures, attempts at reintroducing peregrine falcons and golden eagles met with moderate success and bald eagles also returned to eastern North Carolina.²⁵ The importance of the animal habitats to Morton's promotion of the mountain, much like his rhetoric during the Parkway routing controversy,

resulted in beneficial outcomes for the environment even if these positive results were not his

²⁴ Alice Thrasher, "Mountain Museum: Wildlife Nature Preserve Fulfills a Longtime Dream," *The Fayetteville Observer*, November 10, 1991.

²⁵ Catherine Morton, *Grandfather Mountain*; Jesse Pope, *Grandfather Mountain: What Birds You Can See, When and Where*, Grandfather Mountain pamphlet, 2008.

primary motivation.

Morton's actions on the mountain also demonstrate either a slow evolution of his ideas about conservation or a response in increasing environmentalist pressure. Indicative of the evolution of Morton's sensitivity was the development of increasingly sophisticated enclosures for the animals housed at Grandfather. Mildred appeared first as a roadside attraction, and later the star of a show in an amphitheater constructed expressly for the purpose. Morton built a habitat in 1973 to house his growing brood of creatures, which by this time included some of Mildred's cubs. The growth of the animal habitats prominence over the years was a tacit acknowledgement by Morton that part of Grandfather's appeal stemmed from its natural qualities rather than simply scenic views or attractions such as the Highland Games. The river otters are a particularly flagrant example of housing animals that attract tourists. While otters theoretically could live in every freshwater river system in North America, their presence in the Appalachian Mountains is questionable. In addition, otters would never be seen on the slopes of the mountain, and would only survive much closer to the actual river systems that surround the mountain. River otters proved very popular with visitors, however, and Catherine Morton indicated Hugh Morton's main reason for bringing otters to the mountain was his opinion that they were "fun."²⁶

The diversification of Grandfather Mountain's attractions reflected Morton's increasing emphasis on the environmental aspects of the mountain and his attempt to introduce new components to attract tourists. The breeding of Mildred and the presence of cubs on the property also enhanced the appeal of the animal habitats for visitors. What was simply a scenic trip to the top of the mountain now became a daylong excursion with

²⁶ Jerry Shinn, "Death on the Blue Ridge," *The Charlotte News and Observer*, November 12, 1995. Catherine Morton, *Grandfather Mountain*; Catherine Morton, Personal Interview, 2008.

potential stops in the visitors' center, gift shop, and museum. Animal enclosures and museums, aside from potentially educating the public, also created a reason for tourists to stay at Grandfather Mountain longer. Once Morton realized the popularity of Mildred, the animal enclosures grew to become one of the most important attractions on the mountain.

Mildred was the first animal Morton kept at Grandfather, but as the popularity of the bear and her offspring grew, he expanded his efforts. The inclusion of these more exotic species was primarily based on their popularity with the public and Morton's own interest in seeing the animals brought to the mountain.²⁷ By 2008 Grandfather sported eagles, mountain lions, deer, bears, and river otters. Figuring in advertisements and public appearances, Mildred's role as both the literal and figurative progenitor of Morton's animal habitats gave her a special place in the history of Grandfather Mountain and she served as an iconic mascot of the mountain until her death. Mildred traveled with Morton throughout the state and served as one of the mountain's public symbols for nearly 35 years.²⁸ While Morton developed and defined the mountain in an image of his own conception, Mildred helped not only sell the peak and its owner, but also branded Grandfather Mountain as a place of accessible and tame wilderness.

In addition to serving as an attraction on the mountain itself, Mildred was such a celebrity in North Carolina that she merited newspaper articles chronicling the addition or departure of mates, births of cubs, birthday parties, and ultimately an obituary.²⁹ Whether Morton prompted these articles or not remains unclear, but Mildred's frequency in North

²⁷ Personal interview with Catherine Morton, 2008.

²⁸ Grandfather Mountain promotional material, Appalachian Regional Brochure Collection. W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

²⁹ "Bash Planned for Mildred," *The Charlotte Observer*, February 4, 1987, p 2B; "Mildred the Bear of Grandfather Mountain Dies" *The Charlotte Observer*, January 2, 1993, p 2C.; "Grandfather Mountain Mascot Dies of Old Age." *Greensboro News & Record*, January 2, 1993.

Carolina's newspapers ensured she was a symbol immediately identifiable with Grandfather Mountain and her anthropomorphic portrayal made her accessible. At her death in 1993, handlers mourned the bear like a lost family member. One Grandfather Mountain employee "was so shook up [she] couldn't come to work the next day."³⁰ Mildred's friendly demeanor and sociability also granted her the unique ability to serve as Morton's sidekick in many promotional materials and news stories.³¹ While Grandfather Mountain was almost never discussed without mentioning Hugh Morton, Mildred was equally associated with the mountain attraction and provided a friendly, non-threatening natural aspect of the mountain to the public.

Mildred and her offspring occupied a unique place in Grandfather Mountain's mythology. The bear served as an unofficial ambassador for the mountain and engaged Morton in moments of apparently unrehearsed affection. More than just a symbol of Grandfather Mountain, Mildred's relationship with Hugh Morton humanized the man in a way impossible for other attractions at the mountain. Bridges, walking trails, and mineral museums could not accomplish what Mildred did for Morton's image. In addition to his interaction with the bear, Morton also improved his public perception with his ability to contain and breed a locally endangered species, furthering his environmentalist credentials and boosting his public image.³²

As her popularity grew and Morton built permanent facilities to house her, the addition of animals other than Mildred placed Morton in the position of owning something resembling a small zoo. At a time when the majority of facilities in the United States that

³⁰ Lisa Pollock, "Mountain Feels Bleak without its Mildred," *The Charlotte Observer*, January 8, 1993.

³¹ Grandfather Mountain promotional material, Appalachian Regional Brochure Collection, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina; "Hugh Morton and Mildred: King and Queen of the Mountain," *The Chicago Tribune*, June 29, 1986.

³² Gene Bell, "Father of Grandfather Mountain," *The Miami Herald*, April 1, 1984.

qualified as zoos consisted of large city or state-operated educational facilities, Morton was an early example of both a financially and environmentally successful private zoo. Morton's success was rare. In the late twentieth century many small private zoos in the United States received a surprising amount of attention, mostly negative.³³

The animal habitats' importance to Morton's attraction and their claims to conservation require comparison to developments in zoological trends and animal enclosures on a broader scale. While zoos and aquariums were largely the realm of municipal and state governments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, after the 1950s these facilities confronted dramatic changes in both their stated goals and how they achieved those goals. Emphasizing large landscapes, natural habitats that accurately reflected wild environments, and the conservation of endangered species, American zoos of the late twentieth century departed substantially from their forebears.

As the environmental movement of the 1950s and 60s gained wide acceptance, zoos shifted away from serving simply as entertainment facilities into the realm of expanding the public's awareness of the species on display and providing educational opportunities. During the 1970s, this shift gained professional recognition with the American Zoo Association considering conservation as its most important priority and the increasing development of breeding programs for endangered species. A general increase in the professionalism of zoos after World War II also contributed to scientific management practices and carefully directed breeding programs. Finally, programs at community colleges and universities throughout the United States encouraged the certification of zoo personnel in unprecedented ways.

³³ Linda Goldstein, "Roadside Attractions, Booming Private Zoo Collections Spawn Mini-Industry: Breeding Baby Animals," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 8, 1999; Jeff Diamant, "Weekends Only at Metro Zoo," *Charlotte Observer*, November 16, 1999; "Monkey Business: City Must Get to Bottom of Questionable Zoo Animal Sales," *Birmingham News*, November 16, 1996.

Scientific management of zoo exhibits combined with conservation measures and created facilities that were part entertainment venue and part ecologically sensitive haven.³⁴

Zoos also experienced a dramatic change in the source of their operational funds. While most major metropolitan zoos during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century served as a source of civic pride and therefore garnered public funding, towards the end of the twentieth century zoos increasingly shifted towards a private non-profit business model. Substantial government subsidies remained an important source of funding for many zoos in the United States, but private ventures or public-private cooperatives became more common as the zoos expanded their scope of operations and public debates regarding funding reflected diminishing public support for zoos.³⁵

Central to the debate over the shift to public-private zoo partnerships was the issue of the cost of maintaining a zoo. Over the course of several weeks in December of 1993, the merits of partially privatizing the Pittsburgh zoo were debated on the pages of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Even a cursory glance at headlines such as “Public Money Shouldn’t go to Private Zoo” and “Plan for Private Zoo Would Save Little Money” indicated the financial basis of the debate, and the amount of funds required to keep the city-managed zoo running was substantial. In 1993 Pittsburgh paid nearly \$1.7 million for the zoo’s operation costs, a number that the privatization plan would effectively eliminate by the year 2000. Among the other reasons to transfer management of the zoo to a private entity were the increased likelihood of donations to a private non-profit entity and the ability to cut labor costs by

³⁴ David Hancocks, *A Different Nature: The Paradoxical World of Zoos and Their Uncertain Future* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 112; Vernon R. Kisling, *Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections to Zoological Gardens* (New York: CRC Press, 2001), 169-174.

³⁵ Hancocks, *A Different Nature*, 143-145; Kisling, *Zoo and Aquarium History*, 176-177.

circumventing the public employees union.³⁶

In light of these late twentieth century developments, Grandfather Mountain's animal habitats reflect larger national trends. Morton's private concerns with drawing tourists to his attractions seemed at first glance to stand in glaring opposition to the development of an ecologically minded zoological tradition throughout the late twentieth century, but on closer examination Morton's animal habitats clearly reflect the larger trend towards privatizing zoos and the breeding of endangered animals. In addition to following broader national trends, the animal enclosures at Grandfather Mountain represented better than average conditions, especially when compared to other private endeavors. Indeed, in the 1990s, many private zoos made national headlines for their deplorable conditions and the harsh treatment of their animals.³⁷ What began as a roadside bear show on Grandfather Mountain in the late 1950s served as a model to private breeding programs and small zoos by the 1970s and 1980s, and was cited occasionally as an example of proper small zoo management.³⁸

Morton's success compared to other private zoos was the product of a long process. Spanning a lengthy period, Grandfather Mountain's enclosures experienced an evolution over the course of the attraction's history. What were once considered merely enclosures and habitats for the black bears grew until Hugh Morton's animal habitats rivaled any other private zoo in North Carolina. While it is possible to consider the animal habitats as simply another attraction in a successful tourist development, Morton's management of his private zoo compares favorably to other locations throughout the state and nation, lending credence

³⁶ Tom Barnes, "Public-Private Zoo Called For," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 21, 1993; "Private Zoo Plans Aired," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 11, 1993.

³⁷ Linda Goldstein, "Roadside Attractions, Booming Private Zoo Collections Spawn Mini-Industry: Breeding Baby Animals," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 8, 1999; Jeff Diamant, "Weekends Only at Metro Zoo," *Charlotte Observer*, November 16, 1999; "Monkey Business: City Must Get to Bottom of Questionable Zoo Animal Sales," *Birmingham News*, November 16, 1996.

³⁸ "Is Life Terrible for Ted?" *The Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 1989.

to his claims of environmental sensitivity. When news articles in Miami, Charlotte, and Raleigh chronicled the deplorable conditions in some private zoos, Morton's "animal habitats" were deemed advanced enough to occasionally serve as safe places for creatures rescued from these less fortunate conditions. When a bear was seized while its owners faced charges for animal cruelty, Grandfather Mountain served as the animal's temporary home.³⁹ From the majority of sources available chronicling Morton's treatment of his animals compared to other profit-oriented zoos, Morton's enclosures and care for the animals compares favorably.⁴⁰

Zoo history demonstrates humanity's desire to see supposedly wild creatures in a controlled environment in an exercise of power over nature. While many zoos during the late twentieth century shifted towards creating elaborate enclosures that placed the animals in as natural a habitat as possible, there was still a substantial demand for smaller zoos that enabled visitors to get much closer to the animals. Even as the scientific community increasingly encouraged zoos to place animals in habitats that mimicked their home environments and admonished institutions where animals were kept in small cages for long periods of time, the general public wished for closer interaction the animals. The construction of habitats that imitated the animals' natural environment typically enabled the animals to retreat beyond the visitor's view. This created a scenario where tourists who expected to see specific animals were frequently disappointed.

The divergence between what conservationists and scientists saw as the twenty-first century purpose of zoos and the public's continued demand for viewing exotic animals as

³⁹ Lawrence Toppman, "Is Life Terrible for Ted?" *The Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 1989.

⁴⁰ "Is Life Terrible for Ted?" *The Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 1989; "Weekends Only at Metro Zoo," *The Charlotte Observer*, November 16, 1999; "Private Zoos Fate Uncertain in Spokane," *The Oregonian*, March 24, 1995.

entertainment created a space for various types of zoos and animal exhibits during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. At Yellowstone, the simple laws of supply and demand intervened to create an attraction similar in many ways to Morton's Grandfather Mountain bear exhibits. An article investigating the environmental issues at Yellowstone Park found a business calling itself the "Grizzly Discovery Center, a privately owned zoo," that exhibited "bears no longer accessible in Yellowstone itself."⁴¹ As Yellowstone implemented environmentally sound management practices and the bears were "weaned of their dependence on human food," sightings of the iconic ursidae became increasingly rare. Filling a perceived void in the local tourism industry, the developer of the Grizzly Discovery Center built a 28 million dollar facility that housed five bears at its opening in 1993.⁴² Like the Grizzly Discovery Center, Morton's Grandfather Mountain operated as a for-profit business whose commodities included the guaranteed sighting of a bear that proved elusive in the wild. Similar to Morton's animal habitats, the Discovery Center received what one observer called "begrudging praise" for its conservation measures, which included the appropriate containment of the bears and the ecological pains taken in the development of the land used for the attraction.⁴³

The keeping of native species of animals in enclosures for viewing in a profit-oriented business raised questions regarding the type of nature these establishments portrayed. Morton's natural history museum and educational displays throughout his animal habitats, as well as the Grizzly Discovery Center's "interpretation center" that documented stereotypical Yellowstone scenes from the days when visitors fed the bears, lent a feeling of scientific credence to these small zoos and provided visitors with an interpretive

⁴¹ Jeff Adams, "Bear Sightings Guaranteed at Private Zoo," *Banff Herald*, September 10, 1994.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

framework.⁴⁴ Still, both attractions featured a potentially confusing portrayal of wildlife. Neither the bears at the Grizzly Discovery Center nor Morton's Mildred could be described as "wild." However sensitive the habitats might be to the needs of the animals, the enclosures never approached the wilderness conditions they imitated.

Beginning with the addition of bears to Grandfather Mountain and growing throughout the late twentieth century, the educational value of the presentations at Grandfather Mountain increased as the role of the animal habitats grew in importance. By the 1990s, Grandfather Mountain's animal habitats were managed by full time animal handlers and inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture. As the animal habitats grew to include other species, they eventually constituted a substantial portion of the developed land on the mountain. Despite their growing profile and importance to Morton's business model, Grandfather Mountain's animal exhibits escaped public disdain and successfully avoided many of the pitfalls that doomed other private zoos in North Carolina.

Indeed, while Grandfather Mountain's animal habitats appear as easy targets for environmentalist critiques, the enclosures actually compared favorably with many other attempts at private zoos throughout the southeast. A handful of notable private zoos existed in North Carolina, with several lasting only a few years. The Charlotte Metro Zoo, which opened in 1996, serves as a characteristic example of the problems that plagued private zoos. Maintaining adequate facilities, attracting sufficient numbers of visitors to ensure positive revenue, and simply feeding the animals all appear as reasons small for-profit zoos shuttered. Opened with high hopes in the mid-1990s, the Charlotte Metro zoo featured several species of large cats, chimpanzees, bears, and an assortment of more common animals. Many private

⁴⁴ Ibid.

zoos, much like Grandfather Mountain's animal habitats, featured mostly donated or injured animals that would not survive in the wild.⁴⁵

Private zoos offered what they considered a personal experience with the animals, but this was often a symptom of their close quarters and insufficient facilities. Additionally, the breeding of baby exotic animals frequently served as the only way for these zoos to maintain positive cash flow, resulting in a constant cycle of young unwanted exotic animals.

Whatever critiques were leveled against Grandfather Mountain's animal habitats, the mountain never made headlines for a failure to care for its animals, and occasionally took in animals threatened elsewhere, an indication of its positive reputation in the zoo community.⁴⁶

Morton's operation appeared very professional in comparison to the Charlotte Metro Zoo and the equally ill-fated Triangle Metro Zoo. His long history with keeping healthy animals, coupled with the financial benefits the other attractions provided, contributed to the stability of his animal habitats ensuring the continued health of his animals. Private zoos in areas like Charlotte and Raleigh did not draw enough visitors to adequately support their costs, especially when competing against the official (and state-supported) North Carolina Zoo. A comparison of Grandfather Mountain's animal habitats to these other private zoos results in the conclusion that Hugh Morton developed the animal habitats in a way sensitive to the needs of the animals. While the enclosures at Grandfather Mountain may appear small in comparison to the much larger and more sophisticated North Carolina Zoo, Morton's efforts shine brilliantly when compared to his contemporaries in the private sector. The impact the animal habitats had on visitors' perceptions of nature and wilderness is more

⁴⁵ "Weekends Only at the Metro Zoo," *The Charlotte Observer*, November 16, 1999.

⁴⁶ Lawrence Toppman, "Is Life Terrible for Ted?" *The Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 1989.

difficult to gauge than the conditions of animals, but these issues address greater concerns regarding the interpretation of Grandfather Mountain in general.

In 2010 Grandfather Mountain's website still listed scenery and the Mile High Bridge at the top of a list of "Reasons to Visit," yet entries for hiking trails and "knowledgeable naturalists" indicate the importance of an environmental appeal as well. An entire section of the website dedicated to the animal habitats also emphasizes the importance of these attractions to the mountain's business success.⁴⁷ These gradual developments reflected greater changes in the interests of American society at large and Morton's business savvy, but he cast them as a part of his environmentally sound management of the mountain. In addition to these new attractions on the mountain itself, other private tourist developments increasingly surrounded Grandfather Mountain, making the relative lack of development on the mountain more noticeable and highlighting Morton's claims to ecological sensitivity.⁴⁸

With the successful development of animal exhibits, the continued conservation of the mountain's ridgeline, and favorable comparisons to other private zoos, Grandfather Mountain's management appeared ecologically sensitive by late twentieth century standards. Whatever criticisms might be levied against Morton's profit motive, by the end of the 1980s his status as North Carolina's premier environmentalist was unquestioned. Papers observed Morton's complicated role in North Carolina's environmentalist movement in the early 1990s, finding "He's a man who has tried to manage dual, and at times, dueling careers of development and preservation -- and who has happened to make a lot of money doing it."⁴⁹ An indication of Morton's reputation as a conservationist, supporters cast even his economic

⁴⁷ Grandfather Mountain, Inc. "Reasons to Visit," accessed November 28th, 2010, http://www.grandfather.com/about/reasons_to_visit.php

⁴⁸ "Developers Head for the Hills, Sparking Uncontrolled Growth," *The Charlotte Observer*, June 1, 1987.

⁴⁹ Mary Miller, "Moving Mountains - Hugh Morton Manages Dual -- and Dueling -- Careers of Promotion and Preservation," *The Raleigh News and Observer*, March 31, 1991.

success as a boon to the mountain's preservation. Even park rangers praised Morton, with one praising him for "show[ing] that you can have development and have respect for natural resources at the same time."⁵⁰ As the century came to a close, however, Morton's management of the property would face stronger criticisms. The man who invoked environmental preservation in his battle with the Park Service, promoted his mountain as an ecological wonder, and publicly touted his conservation efforts was confronted by increasingly dissatisfied environmentalists in the 1990s. These new challenges, and the people who levied them, would question the role of Hugh Morton in the ecological preservation of the mountains and strike Morton's environmentalist persona to its core.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

King of the Mountain: Debates over Conservation, Preservation, and Development at Grandfather Mountain

“The whole weakness of the environmental movement is that it doesn’t know how to thank its friends”

-Hugh Morton, 1990

“People in the mountains have always relied on Hugh Morton to do the right thing. But now he can't be trusted.”

-Grandfather Golf and Country Club member, 1997

In the spring of 1990, an article in the *Charlotte Observer* chronicled the unfolding of another contentious battle over the impact of development on Grandfather Mountain. One side marshaled environmental arguments to plead a case rooted in keeping further development off the mountain. The other side argued its development was ecologically sensitive and encouraged the public to take its point of view “on faith.”¹ While sounding remarkably similar to arguments he marshaled during the Parkway routing controversy, Morton was the party criticized in the newspapers for environmental insensitivity. Ironically, the man who hyperbolically described National Park Service attempts to reroute the Parkway as taking a “switchblade to the Mona Lisa” in the 1960s ended up criticized by environmental groups in the late 1980s and 1990s for his pro-development stance.² In the early 1990s, Morton faced attacks by the very environmental movement he believed he helped found for the planned development of a tract he considered ecologically unimportant.

Gentle challenges to Morton’s environmentalist credentials appeared well before the

¹ Bruce Henderson, “Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue Ridge Tract,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 2, 1990.

² Jack Betts, “N.C. History Through a Lens,” *Charlotte Observer*, October 12, 2003.

explosion of protests in the 1990s, but these early articles still portrayed Morton as a noble conservationist.³ A nationally syndicated article for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1986 began with a glowing portrayal of Morton's preservationist persona, but later in the same article the author acknowledged the complications presented by Morton's development of Grandfather Golf and Country Club, a resort at the foot of Grandfather Mountain that drastically altered the landscape.⁴ Even as he expanded animal habitats and battled with the Parkway using conservationist language, Morton built a golf course and housing development that in the valley below the mountain.

Any attempts at defining Hugh Morton must account for the timing of his involvement in Grandfather Golf and Country Club. Morton distributed his "Capsule of Facts" in the late 1950s, and publicly battled the National Park Service throughout the 1960s, yet he developed the country club and housing subdivision even as the Parkway routing was still in question. Morton introduced Mildred to the mountain in 1966, only a few years after the public Parkway battle cooled and two years before breaking ground on the middle route. The combination of publicly touted ecological preservation occurring concurrently with environmentally damaging development reveals some of the irony inherent in Morton's claims to environmental sainthood. In the face of all his development activities, Morton still enjoyed a remarkable amount of public favor in the media for his perceived preservation of Grandfather. These developments laid the foundation for future conflicts over Morton's actual record and his portrayal in the media, however, and these conflicts would greatly impact the future of the mountain.

³ James Hunter, "King of a N.C. Mountain saves Grandfather's Legacy," *The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution*, June 1, 1986; "Western Carolina Council to Tackle Conflicts in N.C. Mountains," *Charlotte Observer*, August 18, 1989.

⁴ "Hugh Morton and Mildred King and Queen of the Mountain," *Chicago Tribune*, June 26th, 1986, J20.

Immediately following the battle over the Blue Ridge Parkway routing, the expansion of attractions both on Grandfather Mountain itself and in the valley below dramatically increased the area's ability to draw tourists. As the popularity of the Appalachian Mountains encouraged the building of second homes, mansions clinging to the sides of surrounding slopes increasingly dotted the scenery, a phenomenon Morton fueled by his involvement in Grandfather Golf and Country Club and Grandfather Mountain.⁵ Built on the land his sister Agnes inherited out of the dissolution of the Linville Improvement Company, Grandfather Golf and Country Club represented a logical business-minded step in the development of the Linville Valley. As one of the finest eighteen-hole golf courses in the Linville area, Grandfather Golf and Country Club offered tourists a gated community and private golf club that prided itself on exclusivity.⁶ Officially opened in 1968, the same year Hugh Morton smiled for photos at the Linn Cove Viaduct groundbreaking for section 2-H, Grandfather Golf and Country Club was a joint effort by Agnes and Hugh to develop an attractive and profitable real-estate development.⁷

Seeking to "[take] advantage of the scenic beauty of the mountains," Hugh Morton's sister Agnes personally surveyed "the chopping of the center lines for each of the fairways through the thick mountain forest."⁸ Much like Hugh Morton's development of Grandfather Mountain's attractions, the construction of the country club could hardly be described in environmentally friendly terms. Aside from the clearing of land and building of homes, golf courses involve inherently damaging construction techniques that require the wholesale

⁵ "Long Opposed to Building Codes, Blue Ridge Residents Now Seek Zoning Rules," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983, A4.

⁶ Howard Ward, "Pinehurst and Skyhawks," *Charlotte Observer*, February 3, 1991.

⁷ Blue Ridge Parkway Section 2-H Groundbreaking Materials. BRPA Officers Series. W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina; Personal Interview with Catherine Morton, 2008.

⁸ Scott Michaux, "The Developer: Agnes Morton Woodruff," *The Greensboro News and Record*, April 16, 2006.

reshaping of the landscape. When combined with the consistent spraying of pesticides, fertilizers, and other chemical treatments, considering Grandfather Golf and Country Club as an environmentally sensitive development becomes increasingly difficult, despite Agnes' desire to exhibit the natural beauty of the mountains. Adding to its impact on the land, Grandfather Golf and Country Club was more than just a golf course. The development included a massive clubhouse and lodge, a large man-made lake fed by the Linville River, and a substantial holding of private lots for sale as single-family home sites.⁹ A photograph taken in December of 1966 depicting the beginning stages of construction for the lake illustrated the destruction inherent in the development.¹⁰

Central to Grandfather Golf and Country Club's appeal was its exclusivity. While Grandfather Mountain's attractions were open to anyone willing to pay the fee and drive to the summit, Grandfather Golf and Country Club required both a club membership and the purchase of real estate, and the club restricted membership to those who received a formal invitation.¹¹ The real estate requirement and membership fees at the country club prevented working class or lower middle class tourists from joining. With a security gate, secluded location, and restricted membership, Grandfather Golf and Country Club appealed to a particularly wealthy segment of North Carolina society, and such exclusive resorts granted their members the opportunity to keep out undesirable elements of society. Commenting on the resort's success in 1985, Hugh Morton observed that he "used to think it was the natural beauty and the lake filled with trout and the golf course that were the top reasons people came, but the number one thing more-affluent people in developments like Grandfather are

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Glen Dornie 12/3/66," Hugh Morton Collection of Photographs and Films, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹¹ As of 2011, the policy of a formal invitation and application process was still in force. <http://www.grandfatherclubnc.com/living-here/membership/> (Accessed 3/29/2011).

looking for is security -- one way to get in and one way to get out, with a guard at the gate”¹²

Another area resident, commenting on the exclusive clubs that dotted the Linville Valley, agreed by saying, “You can't just retire here. You have to know someone.”¹³

The appeal of these developments resulted in the mountains becoming victims of their own success. The booming tourism industry spawned a development craze in northwestern North Carolina, and the same land that the Linville Company stockholders envisioned supporting a large tourist presence finally experienced sustained economic growth. This growth relied on a paradoxical relationship with its surrounding environment, however. Two of the engines of northwestern North Carolina’s tourism success, Grandfather Mountain and the Blue Ridge Parkway, were fueled by beautiful scenery and the relative lack of development in the area.

Both of these iconic developments brought tourists from distant places who, once enamored with the Blue Ridge, found themselves wanting to own a piece of the mountains. The addition in the 1970s of profitable ski resorts to the area made a popular seasonal escape into a year-round playground.¹⁴ The combination of delights available ensured that there was something for everyone in the “High Country,” as northwestern North Carolina began billing itself. Indicating the regional nature of the new tourism industry, an area-wide council of governments encouraged the region to work together towards a common goal and advertised the High Country as a vacation haven.¹⁵ The shift from an agrarian economy supplemented with tourist-dollars to an economy primarily driven by tourism was practically complete by the 1980s.

¹² Linda K. Lanier, “10 Great Ways to Spend Your Retirement,” *U.S. News and World Report*, July 15, 1985.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Henry Lieferman, “The Ugly Floridian: They Came, They Saw, and They Developed,” *Miami News and Sun Sentinel*, July 6, 1986.

¹⁵ Bruce Henderson, “Magic Mountain Fall Lures More Tourists to N.C. Region,” *Charlotte Observer*, October 28, 1986.

Despite a nationally depressed housing market throughout the 1980s, the tourism driven demand for housing in the mountains continued. As demand grew, a new type of development rose above the ridgelines. While earlier low-density housing developments irritated a handful of local residents, a substantial number of mountain residents and other North Carolina citizens acted in the mid-1980s to combat a particularly offensive type of new construction. Appalachian natives and newcomers alike criticized a condominium development on Little Sugar Mountain named SugarTop for ruining the area's natural beauty.¹⁶ Completed in 1983, the high rise represented both a logical evolution of tourist-focused housing developments and a rallying point for opposition to the changes wrought by a tourism economy.

SugarTop, a ten-story condominium with nearly 600 units built by Columbia, S.C. based U.S. Capital Corporation appeared on the summit of Little Sugar Mountain and in the news media in 1982. The structure met with immediate criticism. In an area whose main appeal was the scenery, a high rise building that could be seen "all the way to Tennessee" fundamentally altered the character of the ridge.¹⁷ While the building itself was the main subject of protest, from the earliest days of SugarTop's development U.S. Capital also faced criticism of the building's parent company and the fact that the majority of the tenants were from Florida.¹⁸

While the condominiums were high-priced for the average incomes of local mountain residents, the prices were low enough to attract upper middle-class buyers from the northeast or south Florida. Selling for \$100,000-300,000, the developers of SugarTop observed, "to

¹⁶ "Condo Construction Hits Peaks In North Carolina Mountains," *The Washington Post*, September 18, 1982, E64; Barry Bearak, "Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983, A4.

¹⁷ "Condo Construction Hits Peaks In North Carolina Mountains," *The Washington Post*, September 18, 1982, E64.

¹⁸ "Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6 1983; "Rule Would Keep Condo Builders off Ridge Crests," *Charlotte Observer*, January 29, 1996.

the kind of people we sell to, that's not much money."¹⁹ Purchasing SugarTop's condominiums required an income beyond the reach of most mountain residents and in this way the clientele was similar to Grandfather Golf and Country Club, but the fact that it was a high-rise and not an exclusive social club marred it in the eyes of many vacationers with "very long-and very blue" bloodlines.²⁰ While exclusive communities like Grandfather Golf and Country Club imposed stringent application guidelines and the purchase of real estate in addition to country club dues, SugarTop represented an investment property for many of the initial purchasers.²¹ During the same period, houses in country club developments like Grandfather Mountain Golf and Country Club averaged around \$500,000, with some properties fetching substantially higher prices.²² This purchase price did not include membership dues, application fees, or the invitation process.

In spite of a long tradition of resistance to zoning laws, residents of western North Carolina generally found SugarTop offensive enough to enact legislation against building high-rise structures on prominent ridgelines. Critics of exclusive country clubs like Grandfather Mountain Golf and Country Club frequently complained about the number of Floridians buying property in the mountains rather than the environmental damage.²³ Early fights between the newcomer property owners and longtime mountain residents tended to cast the mountaineers as the environmentally damaging group, and the newcomers as

¹⁹ "Condo Construction Hits Peaks In North Carolina Mountains," *The Washington Post*, September 18, 1982.

²⁰ Linda K. Lanier, "10 Great Ways to Spend Your Retirement," *U.S. News and World Report*, July 15, 1985

²¹ Henry Lieferman, "The Ugly Floridian: They Came, They Saw, and They Developed," *Miami News and Sun Sentinel*, July 6, 1986; "Rule Would Keep Condo Builders off Ridge Crests," *Charlotte Observer*, January 29, 1996.

²² Jane Wooldridge, "The Carolina Connection Each Summer, South Floridians Head for The Mountains," *The Miami Herald*, August 14, 1988.

²³ Henry Lieferman, "The Ugly Floridian: They Came, They Saw, and They Developed," *Miami News and Sun Sentinel*, July 6, 1986.

meddlesome Yankees.²⁴ Local mountain residents occasionally expressed concerns about country club developments, but most saw tourism as a boon to the local economy with one resident observing, “if it weren’t for the ski slopes, a lot of people would be out of work.”²⁵ While some of the arguments in favor of the “ridge law” cited environmental concerns, much of the rhetoric expressed the more prevalent complaints that SugarTop ruined the *scenic views* of the area and represented a dangerous step in the wrong direction for mountain development. Herein lies one of the important distinctions between developments like Grandfather Golf and Country Club and SugarTop, and this distinction helps explain the uneven nature of the public outcry.²⁶

Hugging the valley and obscured by trees, most of the country club’s landscape appeared at first glance to blend with its natural surroundings. Time and careful landscape architecture, while never erasing the ecological damage done during the construction of the golf course and housing lots, softened the appearance of the area. SugarTop was a stark contrast to the surrounding landscape, however, and represented a shocking new type of housing development for the area. At ten stories high, the building was the tallest inhabited structure in Avery County. With its glass and steel construction, SugarTop stood as a modern “marvel of engineering” in the midst of an area that proudly referenced its Appalachian charm.²⁷ SugarTop was not an ecological mistake according to local residents, it was a mistake in judgment that affected the scenery of the area and changed the dynamic of the surrounding communities. When construction crews blasted level the granite mountaintop, no newspaper editorials condemned the actions and few local residents spoke

²⁴ Otis White, “Florida Tourists Changing the Face of North Carolina,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 30, 1991; Tom Mather, “Planning for Beauty: Land-use Guides Advocated for North Carolina Mountains,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, April 7, 1991; Jack Horan, “Climb May Get Easier for Mountain Planners,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 30, 1991.

²⁵ “Developers Head for the Hills Sparking Uncontrolled Growth,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 1, 1987.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983.

out. Only after they completed the structure and the landscape was noticeably changed did opposition and public outcry coalesce around the building's stark contrast to its surrounding environment.²⁸

Hugh Morton's opposition to SugarTop represented another paradox. Having developed Grandfather Golf and Country Club simultaneously with his battle over the Parkway routing, Morton's prominent role in opposing SugarTop represented yet another example of his largely unchallenged environmentalist credentials. Wide public opposition to SugarTop, combined with Morton's strong stance on air pollution in the 1980s, enhanced his claims to ecological sensitivity. Contributing to Morton's acceptance as an environmental authority was his constant coverage in the media as a man of noble causes. Air pollution was Morton's most important campaign in the 1980s and drastically improved his public image.²⁹ Traveling throughout North Carolina with a slideshow of pictures that illustrated the damaging affects of acid rain on trees in western North Carolina, Morton's continued public presence bolstered his perception as a man concerned for the environment.

With the passing of the Clean Air Act of 1990, Morton's environmental credentials gained even greater acceptance, especially when notable public figures like Charles Kuralt mentioned Morton by name as one of the people responsible for the passage of the law.³⁰ Air pollution was one of the many environmental concerns that also affected the success of Morton's tourist attraction. Whatever Morton's motivations for fighting air pollution, it was clear that the dying trees on his mountaintop affected Grandfather Mountain's business. Dead trees at the summit of Grandfather Mountain resulted in a landscape that was less

²⁸ Jack Horan, "Climb May Get Easier for Mountain Planners," *Charlotte Observer*, September 30, 1991.

²⁹ Jerry Shinn, "Death on the Blue Ridge," *Charlotte Observer*, November 12, 1995.

³⁰ Jack Betts, "N.C. History Through a Lens, Hugh Morton Used Images to Influence Public Opinion..." *Charlotte Observer*, October 12, 2003, 1D.

scenic and potentially less appealing to tourists. Mirroring comments about SugarTop, outsiders described the dead trees as “ugly and disturbing.”³¹

Despite the public outcry, from the initial sale of land 1981 through SugarTop’s completion in 1983, the development broke no laws. Moreover, the condos represented for many people a logical outgrowth of a tourism-based economy. Bobby McLean, the man who sold the land on top of Little Sugar to U.S. Capital Corporation, figured the land was worth little unless, “you just wanted to stand up there and look around.”³² McLean’s perspective characterized the way many mountaineers traditionally approached their mountains. Areas that outsiders found particularly appealing for their views rarely held the same appeal for their landowners, especially during the early years of tourism development.³³ Exemplifying larger trends that characterize a shift to a tourism-based economy, local populations in northwest North Carolina welcomed development and tourist dollars for much of the twentieth century.

Ironically, both those who purchased condos in SugarTop and single family homes at Grandfather Golf and Country Club were drawn by the same scenic appeal and cool climate of the Blue Ridge Mountains. As a tourist attraction, Grandfather Mountain drew visitors from outside the Appalachian region, the beauty of the region appealed to these tourists, and they in turn bought resort property available for purchase in housing developments. While Grandfather Golf and Country Club certainly appealed to an exclusive clientele, SugarTop’s buyers came to the region for the same reasons as the country club members. Climate and natural beauty were central to the appeal of both developments, with many property owners

³¹ Jerry Shinn, “Death on the Blue Ridge,” *Charlotte Observer*, November 12, 1995.

³² Bobby McLean in “Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 6 March 1983, A4.

³³ Silver, 224-230.

purchasing second homes and coming from outside North Carolina.³⁴ The condos concentrated this out of state population; creating problems the mountain communities nearby were poorly equipped to handle such as high traffic, sanitation concerns, and overstretched emergency services. Where the reaction against the condos expressed social concerns, it specifically pointed out that SugarTop primarily housed Floridians and offered little to the community. Despite complaints about the condos, there appeared to be a cognitive dissonance between SugarTop and the larger trends affecting the mountain communities as a result of their reliance on tourism, and this manifested itself in the vague language used to complain about the building.

Immediate resistance to SugarTop developed without Morton's guidance. While recognized as one of the most prominent voices, Morton's objections to SugarTop were by no means the earliest nor the only concerns raised. Part of this popular resistance stemmed from the building's alteration of the visible landscape. SugarTop condominiums' position on the summit of Little Sugar Mountain and its stark relief against the surrounding scenery motivated longtime residents who typically encouraged development to voice objections. Calling SugarTop unwise or poorly conceived, many mountain residents expressed disappointment in the building's appearance, not that the ridge was developed. One newspaper article cited how "some commercial growth has been so haphazard and ugly," it needed to be stopped.³⁵ With little mention of environmental concerns, SugarTop universally appears in the public conversation as a planning problem and a symptom of allowing tourists to dictate local economics. One of the sponsors of a ridge law that prevented high-rise developments on prominent mountain peaks, State Representative Margaret Hayden

³⁴ "Long Opposed to Building Codes, Blue Ridge Residents Now Seek Zoning Rules," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983

³⁵ "Developers Head for the Hills Sparking Uncontrolled Growth," *Charlotte Observer*, June 1, 1987.

described SugarTop as a “monstrosity” and said it was “so overwhelming you can’t see the mountain.”³⁶ Local residents also described the condos as ill-conceived and demonstrating poor judgment by the parent company.

In many ways, SugarTop represented larger trends in the tourism industry. Scholarship on the impacts of tourism illustrate the problems of relying on outside sources of capital, the creation of economies based on seasonal and service-sector jobs, and the impact on local cultures from these developments. Without the dominating influence of the government that characterized western National Parks, the eastern tourism industry evolved through strong private investment that relied heavily on the hospitality sector and involved a large segment of the local population. Within the field of Appalachian studies, early scholars failed to acknowledge the importance of tourism beyond a simple economic impact and the industry’s tendency to export unsympathetic stereotypes about Appalachia to urban audiences.³⁷ It is important to note that many of the earliest scholars of Appalachia wrote *before* the public battles over developments like SugarTop. Moreover, many scholars arrogantly placed the “Appalachian folk” that inhabited Appalachian history as distinctly in the past and failed to connect the battles of the late twentieth century over development in the context of this larger exploitation narrative.

An example of the widely accepted exploitation narrative, John Alexander Williams’ *Appalachia: A History* argued tourism is another of the many outside industries that took advantage of Appalachian residents. Transforming the economy of the region into a dependent periphery that relied on a constant influx of leisure spending by visitors from

³⁶ Barry Bearak, “Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983, A4; Mountain Ridge Protection Act of 1983, NC General Statute § 113A-205-219, 676th Congress, session 1.

³⁷ Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*, 213-243. Shapiro’s chapter on the craft revival serves as an excellent example of how historians interpreted the crafts industry in Appalachia through outsider’s viewpoints.

urban areas, the demands of the tourism industry constantly battered traditional ways of life in Appalachian communities. This was especially problematic as “tourists...expected to find the same transactional styles in the mountains that they knew in cities and suburbs.”³⁸

Williams goes on to quote an Ashe County, North Carolina resident who compared the real estate development and ski slope tourist industries to the coalfields of Kentucky, only less overtly offensive for being “couched in prettier terms.”³⁹ While the appearance of wealthy tourists and expensive houses on the ridges seemed at first a blessing, Williams cautioned against “Aspenization,” a sort of gentrification phenomenon that forces the very people who supply necessary services to the fringes of their own communities. Poor working families from the mountains move to the cities because they can no longer afford to live in their traditional communities while affluent tourists buy retirement homes in the mountains to escape the bustling city life where they made their fortunes.⁴⁰

Approaching the problem of tourism from another direction, Al Fritsch and Kristin Johansen cite G.V. Doxey’s “index of tourist irritation” as a way of demonstrating the changing reactions of local people as the tourism industry expands. First elated at the influx of money tourism promises, local people embrace the industry and enter into some of the new jobs available. As the tourism industry grows to become a constant part of the local economy, “the community takes the presence...for granted.” Finally the last two stages reflect “irritation” and “antagonism” as the tourism industry dominates the community and fundamentally changes the environment it entered.⁴¹

³⁸ John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 364.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jane Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 394.

⁴¹ Al Fritsch and Kristin Johanssen, *Ecotourism in Appalachia*, 27.

Perhaps these narratives are helpful in understanding locals' reaction to SugarTop and their growing discontent. Morton's role in the 1983 Mountain Ridge Protection Act, or "ridge law," stemmed from his chairmanship of Western North Carolina Tomorrow, a mountain planning agency. While the legislature debated the law and altered it from its original form, Western North Carolina Tomorrow's members wrote the draft of the legislation and Morton used his connections with the state government to encourage its passage.⁴² The portrayal of SugarTop as a planning consideration or an example of overdevelopment is particularly jarring when compared to contemporary characterizations of Hugh Morton as an environmentalist. Later articles cast the legislation against SugarTop as one of Morton's signature victories while they ignored his role in the development of Grandfather Golf and Country Club. One editorial penned by Rolf Neill, *The Charlotte Observer's* own publisher, waxed poetically that:

"When the money changers invaded the temple of our mountains, Hugh's camera made the case for preserving our billion-year-old heritage against the developer despoilers and predators. The result was the ridge law protecting the irreplaceable views of our mountain tops, but not until after Sugar Mountain had been savaged with Exhibit A, a mountain-top high rise fortress."⁴³

What Rolfe Neill ignored in his hyperbolic rhetoric was Morton's own role as one of the first modern "moneychangers" to exploit the Blue Ridge for profit. First with Grandfather Mountain, and later with Grandfather Golf and Country Club, Morton served as one of the earliest and most successful developers in western North Carolina. Grandfather Golf and Country Club, with its houses and golf course hugging the valley, did not affect the

⁴² Barry Bearak, "Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983.

⁴³ Rolfe Neill, "Do You Hear Mother Screaming?" *Charlotte Observer*, May 15, 1994

appearance of the mountains as much as SugarTop, and Neill's failure to mention the country club may stem from its relatively benign scenic impact.

Generally the rapid growth of the tourism industry in northwest North Carolina met with mixed opinions, however, and the halting language of the ridge law was a possible indication of residents' uncertainty with how to manage the level of development they faced in the late twentieth century. Indicative of the ideological divide, North Carolina newspapers frequently cast mountain development in negative terms, while some local residents nearly always crop up in articles citing the positive aspects of tourist dollars. In addition to the conflicting opinions on tourism, solutions were rarely mentioned for the influx of outsiders, and a general failure to identify who was responsible permeates the accounts.⁴⁴

History also favored developers in the mountains. While it might have prevented the construction of SugarTop had it been passed, a failed 1975 law appeared to many mountain residents at the time as an attempt by eastern North Carolinians or others from "off the mountain" to impose their will on a landscape where they merely vacationed. Roy Taylor, a former congressman and mountain resident was quoted saying "It's [the zoning restrictions] got to be handled locally, I don't think it can come down from state government or from Washington."⁴⁵ When confronted with newcomers who argued zoning could insure the mountains would remain "rustic" for future generations, some local officials snapped back, asking "Who's kept it so pretty? If they let things get so bad where they're from, why do they want to come here and change things?"⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Long Opposed to Building Codes, Blue Ridge Residents Now Seek Zoning Rules," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983; Jack Horan, "Climb May Get Easier for Mountain Planners," *Charlotte Observer*, September 30, 1991; Otis White, "Florida Tourists Changing the Face of North Carolina," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 30, 1991; Tom Mather, "Planning for Beauty: Land-use Guides Advocated for North Carolina Mountains," *Raleigh News and Observer*, April 7, 1991;

⁴⁵ "Developers Head for the Hills, Sparking Uncontrolled Growth," *The Charlotte Observer*, June 1, 1987.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Meddlesome legislators and Yankee planning boards faced resistance from longtime mountain residents, yet for many mountaineers the building of SugarTop represented a departure from the good judgment of previous developers. How the population viewed the building's place on the landscape was fundamental to their reaction to it. Even as local residents derided the ugliness of the building, Hank Harrison, construction manager of SugarTop, likened the building to an innocuous gas station. Met with criticism of the building, Harrison countered "it's ugly at first, but after a while it's just there."⁴⁷ Others credited the building for altering the whole character of the region, revealing the shifting opinions within the community.⁴⁸

Editorials cast SugarTop as a threat to the scenery of the area, but opposing SugarTop did not necessarily require an environmentalist crusade. While later attributed to an ecological sensibility, in 1987 it may have seemed natural for Morton to condemn the condos at SugarTop from a business perspective. Claiming he never intended to develop the entire ridge of Grandfather Mountain, Morton's experience as a real estate developer may have also told him that if the Blue Ridge Mountains became overcrowded they would no longer appeal to the very tourists Grandfather Mountain attracted.⁴⁹ Morton did not have to fight against SugarTop alone, as the condos had already garnered negative national attention before they were completed.⁵⁰

The new law rarely restricted development, however, only stopping builders from constructing specific types of high-rise structures on peaks higher than 3,000 feet. Not seeking a complete cessation of development, and never actually couching their resistance in

⁴⁷ Barry Bearak, "Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983; Mountain Ridge Protection Act of 1983, NC General Statute § 113A-205-219, 676th Congress, session 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Personal Interview with Catherine Morton, 2008

⁵⁰ "Condo Construction Hits Peaks In North Carolina Mountains," *The Washington Post*, September 18, 1982, E64; Barry Bearak, "Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983, A4.

terms of environmental concerns, even the most vociferous opponents of SugarTop left the mountains open to substantial further building. Curiously, this was not how the media portrayed the law. Almost universally cast as a victory for environmentalism, later battles over mountain development cited the 1983 ridge law as an effort shepherded by Morton for the betterment of the environment.⁵¹ This portrayal is particularly interesting considering some of Morton's pro-development statements at the time.

While commenting on SugarTop, Morton expressed his reluctance to encourage legislation that hindered his ability to further develop tracts that did not affect the scenery of the area. Countering arguments that the Mountain Area Management Act of 1975 would have provided protections against development, Morton cast this earlier attempt as so restrictive "you would have had to get a permit from Raleigh to build a henhouse;" excusing himself from supporting the sweeping environmental reform the law required.⁵² Espousing the notion that some development was acceptable, especially when approached in a sensitive way, Morton firmly planted himself in the camp with conservationists and left large areas of the Blue Ridge open to further building. Morton never publicly stated that SugarTop ruined the view from his attraction, but the emphasis on scenery and the specific prohibition of tall buildings on ridgelines indicates the importance of unhindered views to the Blue Ridge Mountains' appeal.

Indeed, the wording of the 1983 ridge law clearly illustrates that it was the *scenery* of the mountains that needed protecting, not the natural environment. Citing planning concerns, fire protection, high wind, and sewage disposal, most of the reasons given for the passage of the law rest firmly outside the realm of environmental preservation. The law even lists tall

⁵¹ Bruce Henderson, "Watauga Residents Protest Ridge Site for New Airport," *Charlotte Observer*, November 3, 1986; Rolfe Neill, "Do You Hear Mother Screaming?" *Charlotte Observer*, May 15, 1994; "Guardians of the Environment," *Charlotte Observer*, November 30, 1996.

⁵² "Developers Head for the Hills, Sparking Uncontrolled Growth," *Charlotte Observer*, June 1, 1987.

buildings' hazards to air navigation and "persons on the ground" before mentioning any concerns for the environment. Only in the last line of the legislative findings section of the law does "natural beauty of the mountains" merit a mention, and even this mention appears concerned more with scenery than ecology.⁵³ Another political strength of the 1983 ridge law was that it offered individual counties the option to set their own rules, thus preserving the ability of local communities to control their own destiny.⁵⁴ This caveat fits with the ridge law's nature as a reactionary piece of legislation and provided pro-development areas with the ability to "opt-out" of the restrictive legislation.

The failure to support the zoning law in 1975 and content of the 1983 law provide clues to why SugarTop was considered offensive and why the public's reaction fails to meet the criteria for an environmental crusade. Instead of passing a law that would have altered the overall management policies for mountain areas, only when a building threatened scenery did legislation make it through the General Assembly. Harrison's observation that after a while SugarTop would be "just there" might have grown into truth over time, but four years after SugarTop's construction, Hugh Morton continued mentioning the passing of the 1983 ridge law in public comments as a victory for sensible development.⁵⁵ Apparently, the difference between sensible development and a derided eyesore could be as simple as the height of the building or a viewer's vantage point and was independent of any ecological damage.

Characterizing the condos as symptomatic of a passing fad, Morton promised no further development of his own properties as "the main attraction of Grandfather Mountain is

⁵³ Mountain Ridge Protection Act of 1983, NC General Statute § 113A-205-219, 676th Congress, session 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Barry Bearak, "Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983, A4; Mountain Ridge Protection Act of 1983, NC General Statute § 113A-205-219, 676th Congress, session 1.

its natural beauty,” which only needed preserving so that “when the cotton candy and Ferris Wheels are gone, we’ll still be in business.”⁵⁶ Additionally, according to Morton’s conception of mountain development, Grandfather Mountain and SugarTop were not connected. Characterizing his development of Grandfather as merely an attempt to share the beauty of his beloved mountain with the world, Morton’s role as a developer and tourism promoter in other locations throughout the state rarely impacted his association with the natural attributes and scenic views at Grandfather, and his environmentalist persona continued to gain public acceptance.

Whether Morton’s disdain for SugarTop stemmed from a serious concern for the ecology of mountain ridges or from a fear that the building would affect the value of views from his Mile High Bridge, both his opposition to SugarTop and his public air pollution campaign pose questions of the seriousness of Morton’s commitment to environmental causes. Having previously developed both Grandfather Mountain and Grandfather Golf and Country Club, Morton seemingly balanced his public perception in the 1970s and 1980s with ostensibly environmentally friendly stances on SugarTop and air pollution.

Further critiques of Morton’s environmentalist credentials stem from the effect both ridge top development and air pollution might have on Grandfather Mountain’s financial success. Both affected the views from Linville Peak, which despite diversification remained the primary attraction on the mountain. Whether denuded of trees by acid rain or marred by unrestrained development, Morton’s mountain views were threatened in the 1980s and these threats are reflected in the two battles he chose to fight. The success or failure of these

⁵⁶ Ibid.

crusades affected Morton's bottom line, but the public perception of Morton's actions by the late 1980s remained positive and portrayed him as an environmentalist.⁵⁷

In addition to the complex interaction between Morton's public perception and his business interests, Grandfather Mountain's role in the development of northwestern North Carolina was generally whitewashed in the media. It was undeniable that Grandfather Mountain was one of the engines driving the tourism economy, and in this way SugarTop represented the highest evolution of a successful tourism industry. The Linville area became so popular that a garish building like SugarTop appealed to tourists. Even as locals considered it an eyesore and fought to keep similar buildings from appearing, Sugar Top's existence demonstrated the region's material success.

SugarTop reveals other contradictions surrounding Morton's assumed public persona. Hugh Morton's language casting himself as a mountaineer during this time is curious, especially considering the growing anger of longtime residents over the influx of outsiders. Morton himself remained a seasonal resident of Avery County until 1974, making his comments regarding SugarTop's unpopularity with residents ironic. Quoted in the *Charlotte Observer* as saying "now, even the most isolated hillbilly is reaching the realization that we have scalawags among us that weren't here before," Morton clearly considered himself a local while at the same time stereotyping his neighbors.⁵⁸ As "defender" of Grandfather Mountain and a man who frequently mentioned how much he loved the mountain, perhaps Morton thought he was an honorary local. Whatever the public sentiments, Morton was an

⁵⁷ Jerry Shinn, "Death on the Blue Ridge," *Charlotte Observer*, November 12, 1995; Bruce Henderson, "Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue Ridge Tract," *Charlotte Observer*, April 2, 1990. Even articles that critiqued Morton still left readers with a generally positive impression: James Hunter, "King of a N.C. Mountain saves Grandfather's Legacy," *The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution*, June 1, 1986.

⁵⁸ "Developers Head for the Hills, Sparking Uncontrolled Growth," *The Charlotte Observer*, June 1, 1987.

outsider who did not assume ownership of Grandfather until the 1950s and only permanently moved to Avery County in 1974, less than a decade before the uproar over SugarTop.

Emerging from SugarTop and his public crusade against air pollution widely regarded as an excellent steward of the mountains, Morton's environmentalist credentials came under fire in 1990 when environmental groups confronted him about the planned development of a 900 acre area called the Wilmor tract. Located on the farthest northwestern slope of Grandfather Mountain, the plan for the property initially included condominiums, single-family housing, a strip mall, and a fast food restaurant. Located near the busy intersection of North Carolina Highways 105 and 184, the property occupied a prime position for a small retail and housing development. At a crossroads for several of the ski slopes, the intersection was also close to the many golf courses and private housing developments that appeared during the late twentieth century.

The debate over Wilmor centered on what qualified as appropriate development of land and engaged a greater debate in the environmental community over whether the goal of environmentalism was *preservation* or *conservation*. While Morton literally shouted his conservationist credentials from the mountaintops, with the proposed development of the Wilmor tract the growing environmental movement began questioning Morton's motives. Facing criticism from new environmental groups, the man who had owned the mountain for nearly a half century without developing more than a fraction of the mountain's available land was indignant anyone might imply he intended to harm the mountain.⁵⁹ Arguing the area in question should not be considered a part of Grandfather Mountain proper, Morton's terminology cast the summit and steep slopes as the areas in need of preservation. Several

⁵⁹ Bruce Henderson, "Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue Ridge Tract," *Charlotte Observer*, April 2, 1990.

environmental groups protested, including one calling themselves “Friends of Grandfather Mountain,” implicitly saying Morton was no longer the mountain’s best steward.⁶⁰

That a mountain owned by a man nationally recognized as an environmental lion would need protecting reveals a curious development in the way Americans thought about natural places. Competing ideas manifested themselves in either *conservation*, the notion that careful development and management of natural areas is acceptable on some level, or *preservation*, which attempts to completely rope off natural areas from human intervention. Morton’s attempted development of the Wilmor tract cast this larger debate in local terms and the public conversation about the Wilmor development cast Morton’s opinions on nature and the environment in clear relief. Morton subscribed to notions of conservation, not preservation, as evidenced by his initial development of Grandfather Mountain as a tourist attraction, its gradual expansion throughout the twentieth century, and his continued willingness to develop other properties he owned surrounding the mountain.

Many of the new groups opposing Morton felt that any development of Grandfather Mountain, especially with its rare habitats and endangered species, was an unnecessary environmental risk. The debate over Wilmor also cast into sharp relief some of the competing views within the environmental movement. While groups like the Friends of Grandfather Mountain characterized Morton as acting against the interests of the mountain and therefore falling outside their favor, other groups treated the situation delicately. The Sierra Club, when asked about the Wilmor tract, offered a diplomatic response that

⁶⁰ “Fight for Grandfather Mountain,” *Charlotte Observer*; Jack Horan, “Dispute Over Grandfather Mountain Preservation Escalates,” *Charlotte Observer*, February 1, 1992.

acknowledged Hugh Morton's contributions to other environmentalist causes, like air pollution, and concluded that they felt criticism of Morton might prove counter-productive.⁶¹

The challenge to Morton in the 1990s represented a logical critique of a man news reports characterized as a consummate conservationist. As Morton came under increasing pressure for his developments he appeared less the environmental champion and more the tourism promoter. For many years, the development of Grandfather Mountain and the preservation of its slopes fit neatly together, but ironically, with the growth of the very tourism economy he helped build, as Morton developed part of the land he owned it made regional news and cast doubt on his role as benevolent environmentalist.

While an explicit connection is difficult to prove, pressure from environmental groups over the Wilmor Tract may have motivated Morton to donate easements on the 1,766 acres of Grandfather Mountain he owned outright to the Nature Conservancy. Primarily consisting of land he could never develop because of its topography, much of the 1,766 acres covered the highest portions of the mountain and the donation did shelter endangered species and fragile ecosystems. The timing of the donation is questionable, however. Shortly after the first critiques of Morton's environmentalist credentials appeared in newspapers in 1990, Morton announced an effort to permanently protect the summit of the mountain from development and began placing easements on the 1,766 acres.⁶² Simultaneous with these announcements, however, Morton continued developing parts of the Wilmor tract, although he did promise a reduced footprint. The outcome of the Wilmor tract controversy did not have a clear conclusion like the Parkway routing battle. Once again, Morton won the argument, but the conclusion of the debate came about with some development of the Wilmor tract anyway.

⁶¹ Bruce Henderson, "Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue Ridge Tract," *Charlotte Observer*, April 2, 1990.

⁶² "Mr. Morton's Mountain Easements Will Protect Priceless Piece of North Carolina," *Charlotte Observer*, February 26, 1991.

Neither side could claim a full moral victory, although both tried. Morton continued claiming he was a champion of the environment and his opponents continued arguing that his development of any land on Grandfather represented an offense to Mother Nature.

When combined with Morton's own developments on Grandfather Mountain and the development of the Wilmor tract, Morton's environmentalist credentials appear prime targets for criticism. While fascinating as a point of analysis for whether Hugh Morton as a person wholly subscribed to environmentalist principles, the ecologically beneficial outcomes of ridge laws, the Linn Cove viaduct, and the Nature Conservancy are rarely questioned. Air pollution legislation, the donation of thousands of acres to the Nature Conservancy, and the establishment of breeding populations of endangered species in his animal habitats served to further bolster Morton's environmentalist claims despite his somewhat ambiguous public record. Much like his rhetoric when fighting the Park Service, Morton's mobilization of language and ability to cast himself as an environmental hero served to validate the stories he told.

At the core of his appeal to resisting the National Park Service, Morton employed the most basic of arguments, those of landowner rights, but publically injected his argument with environmentalism. Morton's relatively benign ownership of the mountain and his ability to sell Grandfather Mountain to tourists as an environmentally wild place allowed him to employ his own myths about Grandfather Mountain to support his battle.⁶³ Morton also separated himself from the Linville Company, which had altered the natural state of the mountain considerably and downplayed the destruction his own development caused. Morton recognized the importance of uncluttered views from his swinging bridge and

⁶³ Correspondence between Morton and Al Rachal, James Broyhill, and Charles Whitley, 1962-68, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina. Correspondence between Morton and Charles Raper Jonas, Luther Hodges, and Sam Weems, 1962-68, Charles Raper Jonas Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill North Carolina.

utilized arguments in both the Parkway routing and his push for the ridge law that indicated the importance of preserving the scenic qualities of the mountains. Still, Morton's role in developing various attractions casts a shadow over his claims to have always acted in the best interest of the mountain. The proximity of the Parkway and the ruination of the scenery by SugarTop received comments from Morton, yet his role in developing Grandfather Golf and Country Club rarely figured prominently in the public discourse.

Ultimately Morton's environmentalist credentials emerged from the Wilmor controversy questioned but intact. In the middle of the public debate over land use at the headwaters of the Linville River, Morton received the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Award and designated approximately 2,000 acres as permanently safe from development. Morton also published a collection of photographs with a distinctly environmental overtone, and the publicity for the book regularly touted his accolades.⁶⁴ As Morton entered the twenty-first century, there was little question the man's legacy was complicated. By the end of the century, however, after nearly sixty years in the public spotlight, Hugh Morton faced the realities of age and began to slowly scale back his activities. In 2004, when he passed the formal leadership of Grandfather Mountain, Inc. to his grandson Crae, Hugh Morton continued the tradition of family ownership of Grandfather Mountain. Finally releasing his personal control of the peak, when Morton stepped down from leading daily operations on the mountain he had donated nearly 4,000 acres of conservation easements to the North Carolina Nature Conservancy. Already in his late seventies during the last fight over development on the mountain, Morton's retirement would not last long. After fighting

⁶⁴ "Hugh Morton's North Carolina," *The Mountain Times*, September 18, 2003; Marth Quilin, "Carolina in His Lens: Hugh Morton," *The Raleigh News and Observer*, June 11, 2006; Mary Miller, "North Carolina Through Hugh Morton's Lens," *The Raleigh News and Observer*, September 28, 2003.

esophageal cancer, Hugh Morton died at the age of eighty-five in June of 2006 at his home near the foot of Grandfather Mountain.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Bruce Henderson, "N.C. Promoter Hugh Morton Dies," *Charlotte Observer*, June 2, 2006.

CONCLUSION

Grandfather Mountain: Business Interest to Symbol of Wilderness?

“Really, some of this boils down to whether you believe in the right to private property.”

-Hugh Morton, 1990

“Grandfather Mountain is too significant to have any potential for anyone ever to ruin it.”

-Crae Morton, 2008

Upon his death, newspapers throughout North Carolina universally praised Hugh Morton as a one of the state’s most noteworthy citizens. A cascade of obituary articles throughout the month of June reminisced about the man and waxed poetically about his lifetime of achievements. Some articles focused on his life-long love of photography, while some emphasized his promotion of North Carolina tourism. Nearly all the articles cast Morton as an environmentalist. Most mentioned his role as a developer, with many obituaries managing to blend Morton’s competing legacies. Far from presenting a problem, Morton’s double roles merged seamlessly into a story of a legendary man who developed the mountains in an “appropriate” way. Morton’s exceptionalism was noted, with one mourner asking, “how many people do you know who are a combination of a developer and an environmentalist?”¹ This portrayal as a man who successfully married environmental preservation with economic development undoubtedly would have pleased Morton. His

¹ Tim Whitmire, “Hundreds Gather to Honor Hugh Morton’s Memory,” *Mobile Press-Register*, June 5, 2006.

portrayal in the newspapers, however flattering, obscured some of the most prominent contributions to North Carolina

As a man, Hugh Morton was a developer first and a conservationist second. While his record as owner of Grandfather Mountain includes some notable environmental victories, ultimately he is known universally for being the owner of Grandfather Mountain's tourist attraction: the man who believed in the profitability of the mountain. For the first two decades of the attraction's existence, Morton remained a resident of Wilmington and the mountain was just one of many businesses he managed across the state. Even the arguments supporters used during the Wilmor tract controversy praised Morton primarily for exercising restraint in his development, not abstinence.² In addition to his actions suggesting he was more of a developer than an environmentalist, Morton was also a developer first and an environmentalist second chronologically. His development of the mountain started with attractions that took advantage of the scenic beauty of the peak, but they grew over time to include animal habitats recognized throughout the region for the humane treatment of their inhabitants.³ His ecological arguments during the Parkway routing battle blatantly served his own interests, yet later campaigns against air pollution and in favor of mountain planning resulted in sweeping legislation that had far-reaching benefits beyond his own property. Morton was a businessman first, but the methods he used to promote and protect his business interests on the mountain affected more than just his bottom line.

Taking the whole of Morton's life, it is necessary to dispel the myths of a noble environmentalist whose gentle hand guided Grandfather Mountain to its eventual status as a

² "Guardians of the Environment," *The Charlotte Observer*, November 30, 1996; Bruce Henderson, "Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue Ridge Tract," *The Charlotte Observer*, Monday, April 2, 1990.

³ "Is Life Terrible for Ted?" *The Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 1989.

state park. Morton was a businessman who used environmentally friendly language and the natural beauty of his mountain to operate a profitable tourist attraction. Yet for all its inaccuracies, the myth surrounding Hugh Morton did result in the final, permanent preservation of Grandfather Mountain's peaks. In this light, the importance of Morton's contributions to environmentalism cannot be understated. As a pioneer in the business of ecotourism, Morton was uniquely poised to shape the ways tourists consumed the commodity of nature and how they viewed his mountain. While promoting Grandfather, Morton cast the place as a natural preserve, and many tourists came to view the mountain as a park well before its formal incorporation into the state park system. One observer, reflecting on the attraction Morton built at Grandfather, summarized the development by saying "it amounts to a small, private national park. 'Inoffensively accessible' was Morton's...description."⁴

Despite the glowing public perception of Morton, it did not reflect the full reality of his motivations and actions. Many of the accomplishments credited to Morton (the Linn Cove Viaduct, Mountain Ridge Act of 1983) were not actually accomplishments at all, but the direct result of obstructionist policies. The Linn Cove Viaduct cost the Federal government millions of dollars, a cost that might have been prevented if the Parkway followed the higher route favored by the Park Service. These facts did not matter for the construction of the Morton myth, however, and the myth accomplished nearly as much on Grandfather Mountain as the man himself.

The beauty of Morton's self-constructed legend was its impact on Grandfather Mountain after his death. Whatever mythmaking might surround Morton's life, the impact of Morton's legacy had an undeniably positive effect on the mountain's ecological future. Less than two years after Morton died, the state of North Carolina purchased the undeveloped

⁴ "Hugh Morton," *Wilmington Star-News*, June 4, 2006.

portions of Grandfather Mountain with the intention of forming a state park for a sum of \$12 million.⁵ “The deal...[was] intended to protect the land and its abundant wildlife from development,” which according to the article “was a lifelong mission of the late Hugh Morton.”⁶ It will always remain unknown whether Morton would have donated or sold Grandfather Mountain to the government for incorporation into a park, but environmentalist reputation influenced his successors to act where he might have deferred. In this way, as the attraction enters a new era under public ownership, the myth of Hugh Morton’s selfless stewardship becomes more important to Grandfather Mountain than ever. Even from the grave, Hugh Morton continues to shape Grandfather Mountain’s future. After years of casting himself as an “ardent environmentalist” and the “guardian of Grandfather Mountain,” the peak he promised to preserve enjoys the type of protection he never managed to give it.⁷

⁵ Stella Hopkins, “Observer Exclusive: North Carolina to Buy Grandfather Mountain,” *The Charlotte Observer*, September 28, 2008.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bruce Henderson, “N.C. Promotor Hugh Morton Dies,” *The Charlotte Observer*, June 2, 2006; Stella Hopkins, “Observer Exclusive: North Carolina to Buy Grandfather Mountain,” *The Charlotte Observer*, September 28, 2008.

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