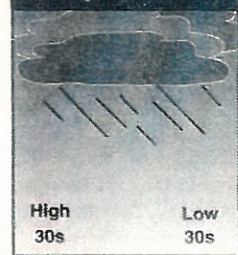


January 27, 1997

# Watauga

## DEMOCRAT

Today's weather



## Grandfather Mountain's back-country winter

LINVILLE (AP) — Brian Repass and Steve Miller wrapped themselves in down and wool, strapped on radios and stepped into the icy blast. One mile up on Grandfather Mountain, the 60 mph wind raked their exposed flesh with below-zero wind chill and tried to blow them off the cliff.

"This is typical up here for November," said Miller, the back country manager for Grandfather Mountain. "We get 5-, 6-, 7-foot tall snow drifts in February."

Rime ice left by passing clouds encased the boulders, spruces and firs in frigid, gleaming rock candy. The men walked under a rock the size of a double-wide and dripping with fat icicles.

This was a day few people would leave their homes, much less hike into a snowstorm on a frozen mountaintop. Yet Miller had left the flatlands of Indiana, and Repass had quit a Washington white-collar job to take care of this harsh yet fragile place.

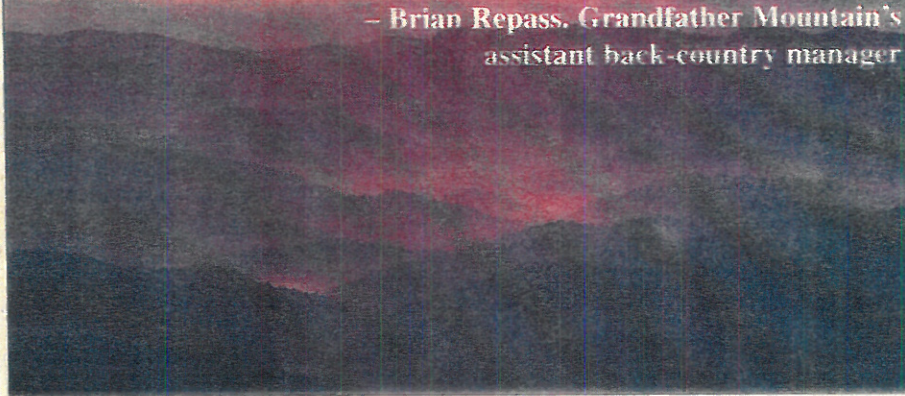
Even in winter, the mountain beckons.

"The nature itself is rough but not mean at all," said Repass, assistant back-country manager. "There's almost a spirituality to it. It creates a sense of awe, a sense of wonder, that's unique to Grandfather Mountain."

Long before Miller and Repass first climbed its flanks, Grandfather had been a place where humans found themselves. Grandfather Mountain may be best known for its Mile High Swinging Bridge and miniature zoo for bears, cougar, bald eagles and other noble creatures, but its 2,700-acre back

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— Brian Repass, Grandfather Mountain's assistant back-country manager



MARIE FREEMAN/Democrat Staff

One of the many views available from the peaks of Grandfather Mountain

country is the most unusual attraction.

This island of ragged rock harbors more rare animals and plants than the Great Smoky Mountains National Park does, an area about 175 times larger than Grandfather. The Nature Conservancy, a nonprofit conservation group, jointly manages the back country with Grandfather Mountain Inc. to monitor and protect its geology and biodiversity. Since 1993, the

mountain has been designated a United Nations International Biosphere Reserve, the only privately owned land in the world to earn the distinction.

Grandfather is a place of contrasts. Its stark metamorphic boulders that tower over the Blue Ridge Mountains harbor endangered BB-sized tarantulas that live under moss mats. Thin layers of soil support plants with names like bent avens, Blue Ridge goldenrod, stinkhornt and destroying angel. Where winter winds gust up to 175 mph and temperatures drop as low as minus 32.

The modern face of Grandfather reflects one man in particular, Hugh Morton. As a developer and conservationist, Morton embodies the sometimes conflicting forces at play around the mountain. He put a suspension bridge, gift shops, parking lots and a small zoo on his mountain but agreed to sell or grant conservation easements on almost all of the rest of the property.

"Everybody has known all my life that Grandfather was special," said Morton, who inherited the mountain from his grandfather in 1952. "I don't think any of us have a chance of getting to heaven if we didn't take care of it."

Especially in winter, Grandfather's many outcrops make for outstanding views of the rippled landscape of Avery.

*Please turn the page*

## Grandfather Mountain's back-country winter

Caldwell and Watauga counties and the lands beyond.

The unusually rugged mountain has consistently driven humans to hyperbole.

The Cherokees called it Tanawha, "a fabulous hawk or eagle."

European settlers saw faces in the rocks and dubbed the three-peaked mountain "Grandfather."

Morton's grandfather, Hugh MacRae, started to develop Grandfather in 1880s, when resorts began to blossom in the surrounding mountains.

The tourists followed soon afterward. They began paying for the privilege of standing on top of it in the early 1900s.

The biggest changes came after Morton inherited the mountain in 1952.

A World War II combat newsreel photographer and gifted shutterbug, Morton had a vision as big as Calloway Peak and an irrepressible drive to carry it out.

He persuaded the National Park Service to route the Blue Ridge Parkway around his mountain, instead of blasting through it.

Biologists are going through their own raptures on Grandfather. Crawling around the high-altitude forests with magnifying glasses, they found tiny tarantulas named spruce-fir moss spiders, the last wild population anywhere.

Biologists found endangered northern flying squirrels gliding from tree to tree and peregrine falcons outmaneuvering other birds at breakneck speeds.

In 1994, government biologists replanted 1,000 seedlings of Heller's blazing star on the side of Grandfather Mountain, one of the

eight places in the world they are known to grow.

The flood of visitors dwindles to a trickle on days like this one. The cold snap has curled the rhododendron leaves into tight, waxy tubes. Poling out of the snow, round-leaved, musky galax seems to have turned a chilly shade of purple.

Grandfather changes with every season and every condominium and hotel built around it. On a day when the clouds and the snow and the cold sun rule, however, it seems eternal.