

LIVING



Globetrotter Dogma

By Bruce Northam

Exploring North Carolina's Blue Ridge High Country

Five Counties Above 3000 Feet Along the Blue Ridge Parkway

"Wise Folks Still Seek Hills"

"When a man is happy he does not hear the clock strike."

---Scots-Irish Proverb



As a budding freshman at Virginia's **Lynchburg College**, when term papers were still being pounded out on 30-pound typewriters, I spent my fall break hitchhiking along the entire length of the 469-mile **Blue Ridge Parkway**, the meandering link between the Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains.

I revisited an epic stretch of the winding, quieting two-lane road connecting Northern Virginia and Western North Carolina because this "High Country" is where wise folks still seek hills.

Retracing Daniel Boone

Boone (elevation 3,333 ft.) was once an inaccessible mountain town in Northwest North Carolina, hence the saying: "The best way to get to Boone



is to be born there."

Deftly balancing old-time Southern charm and ecological sustainability, the green movement is here and windmills are beginning to grace the undulating horizon. The former **Daniel Boone** hangout is home to **Appalachian State University**. Its football team made global headlines when they beat the **University of Michigan** in 2007. Thereafter, university applications tripled.

The surrounding region is Mecca for "before 'lectric powah" archetypal bluegrass music. There's no need for any folk revivals here; around random corners you'll meet people picking early American fretless banjos, accompanied by guitars, fiddles or harmonicas.

This is also ground zero for hog calling legends and cloggers (a.k.a. country tap-dancers). The high country's elevation also keeps mosquitoes at bay.

Dining at the **Boone Drug** lunch counter, a haven for satisfying artery-cement entrees and local color, I overheard two old-timers discussing America's current economic woes -- quips included:

"As crazy as a duck in a thunderstorm..."

"Like eating crackers through a screen..."

Joe Miller, part owner of Boone Drug and founder of **Cheap Joe's**, a global art supply company, was literally born on the sidewalk under the Boone Drug sign (which makes answering 'what sign are you' a cinch).

The ex-pharmacist and water colorist enjoys "southern style business models" where courtesy wins, not greed.

Travel writer **Charles Kuralt** called Boone's **Mast General Store** the heart and soul of the south. The multi-room store is on the National Register of Historic Places because it's not budging from its 1884 origins. You can read a book there, or buy *everything* from molasses to high-tech hiking gear.

Christmas Tree Capital



Ashe County, the Christmas tree province that's frequently supplies the White House tree, boasts several gems, including artsy **West Jefferson**, a sleepy valley town that will likely double in size by 2020 (as urbanites give up on cement), and **Glendale Springs Holy Trinity Church**, a stop on the **Ben Long Fresco Trail** that's open for mediation 24/7.

Grassy Creek's **River House** flanks the New River, one of the Earth's rare rivers. Like the Nile, it flows north, and next to the Nile, it's the world's second oldest river.

Set on 160 acres, the River House's nine rooms include a lavishly renovated chicken coop and a divine space previously used a cattle weigh station.

The epic front porch of the main house has eight rocking chairs that overlook the river, and a simpler time. Their kayaking option is a leisurely downriver breeze that earns rocking chair time and a glass of fine wine.

Owner **Gayle Winston**, a tenth generation Ashe County native and Manhattan resident/patron of Broadway from 1953-73, oversees the country kitchen gourmet dining and wine sampling in *her* living room. The River House defines North Carolina royalty.

The landscape of a county that's the second largest Christmas tree producer after the entire state of Washington strives beyond native Fraser Firs; deciduous trees are an even match for the rolling rows of conifers.

Indian legends survive here because when times are rough, it helps to heed the lessons of an American civilization that survived 11,000 years.

"Beware of loan wolves."

An Indian didn't actually say that, one of the old guys in Boone Drug did.

A New Deal 'Deal'



The Blue Ridge Parkway evolved from **President Roosevelt's** New Deal proposal for a system of parkways to link historic and beautiful sites.

Local Congressman "**Farmer Bob**" **Daughton** (served from 1911-53 and chaired the powerful Ways and Means Committee) allegedly manipulated President Roosevelt's WPA for a New Deal *deal*.

Daughton, whose Laurel Springs home still flanks the Blue Ridge Parkway (and is a bed and breakfast called **Doughton Hall**), thought that Social Security would make elders lazy, but was swayed to vote for it when Roosevelt helped steer the parkway through **Alleghany County** instead of nearby parts of Virginia and Tennessee.

Ground was broken on the Blue Ridge Parkway on September 11, 1935, at **Cumberland Knob** in Alleghany County. The remarkable roadway was "completed" in 1967, though eight miles remained incomplete around foreboding Grandfather Mountain.

The Linn Cove Viaduct at milepost 305, suspended along the mountain face and designed to protect the delicate environment, was not completed until September 1987.

Mile-high **Grandfather Mountain** -- climb or drive up for stunning views and a sandwich -- also has an absolutely splendid zoo. The above-and-below water otter exhibit is the best zoo showcase I've ever seen.

There's also a panther habitat (panthers, unlike similarly sized tigers, are always one uniform color) and several compliant bears adeptly catching bear food-nuggets tossed by patrons into their mouths like they're at a bear frat party.

North Carolina's High Country is a sprinkling of arts colonies in Blue Ridge Mountain valleys where Scots-Irish immigrants bred the legend of bluegrass and firm handshake hospitality ... and the tales that bless it. A detour up here definitely beats eating crackers through a screen.

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For more information about North Carolina's High Country visit [MountainsofNC](#)

Boone's student-run Broyhill Inn is casual, quiet and comfortable --- the top shelf chef never disappoints. Check it out at: [Broyhill Inn](#).

High Country wines, made from spring water and disease-free grapes, will compliment any dining experience. Check out: [Thistle Meadow Winery](#) and also check out: [Banner Elk Winery](#)

If transiting through Charlotte, NC (they call themselves Charlotteans), check out the swank, downtown [Aloft Hotel \(a W property\)](#)

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