

Grandfather Mountain, 1953

by Ellie Northam

When I was seven years old, my parents and I took a trip to Florida to visit Dad's sister and her family. They had just moved there earlier that year, and y Ellie NorthamI missed my cousin, Marcia. We drove directly down on highways and spent a couple of weeks visiting them and sightseeing most of the places of interest in the Gulf Coast of Florida.

When we headed home, we headed out on the back roads through the Smoky Mountains and the Blue Ridge Parkway, stopping to see some of the old pre-Civil War homes and estates. Being just a kid, I wasn't interested in them (I'm still not). I did perk up when my father said that we were going to a place that had just opened earlier in the year: Grandfather Mountain. The place had a mile-high swinging bridge that visitors could walk over from one mountain to the next peak. The bridge was 228 feet long over an 80 foot deep chasm. As it was a free hanging suspension bridge, it swayed as you walked over it. It really sounded like fun.

As with most kids traveling, I kept up a barrage of "Are we there yet?" and "How much longer?" I must have been pretty persistent because my father finally said that if I didn't shut up, he would turn around and go directly home. I quieted down then until we finally reached the entrance and headed up the mountain. I didn't know that any place could be as high as the highest spot in the Smoky Mountains, 5964 feet high!

My mother, who hated heights, kept her eyes closed and her coat over head all of the way up. She peeked out a couple of times, let out a squeak or a heaven help me, and covered back up again. Up, up we went, twisting and turning around the hairpin turns. Every turn opened up to a new and beautiful view. After what seemed like forever, we made it to the top of the mountain and a newly leveled parking lot.

At the far end of the lot was a little shack and nothing else. Dad drove down toward the shed and parked. As he got out of the car and headed toward the shed, a big, old man with the biggest beard I had ever seen, bigger even than Santa Clauses' came out. He was wearing a pair of overalls and big old boots. He greeted Dad in some language I couldn't understand. After a bit of talking, Dad paid him and returned to the car. The man followed him. Looking at me, the man asked me (his accent was so strong I wasn't sure what he was saying) if I was planning on going over the bridge. "I sure am," I replied.

"It's kind of high", he said (I was beginning to understand him by that time).

"I've been on high bridges before", I responded, very sure of myself.

"Well, OK. If you're sure you won't be too scared."

"I won't be scared," I came back.

So my father parked the car in a position where my mother couldn't see the edges. We then headed over to the path the attendant had pointed out. We walked and walked and walked until we finally came out into the open. It looked like we could see out forever and like a bottomless drop.

"Where is the bridge? I asked my father.

"Right there," he said, pointing to the dangling contraption in front of us. The bridge dangled between the peak we were standing on and the peak of the next mountain, suspended by a big thick cable. The bottom of the bridge was made out of 3 foot long pieces of wood, held together by rope, with another rope to hang onto.

"That is a bridge?" I asked.

"Yes", he answered. "Let's go." He headed right onto that flimsy line of wood. "Come on," he called.

It wasn't until I tentatively put one foot ever so lightly on the first board that I felt fear. Cold, dark, paralyzing fear. The bridge moved a little and I jumped back. "Come on," he called. "You can do it." I tried again, and stalled again. "Come on", he called. "Just take it one step at a time. It's a long way to fall." With that, I turned around and walked away from the edge of the cliff.

"Oh, I'm just kidding", he called. "It's perfectly safe. Give it another try", and he came over and offered me his hand. I put one foot on the bridge again and grabbed on tightly to his hand. "That's it. You can do it," he said.

I put my other foot on the shaky contraption and stood still for a minute. I have never been so scared in my entire life. I was shaking from head to foot. Then, not looking down, I took a big, deep breath, and, still holding his hand, I took another step, then another and another until, to my surprise, we were at the other end of the bridge.

"I told you that you could do it," he said. There wasn't much to see on that side, so we slowly, carefully headed back over the bridge with me not holding on to my father's hand, and feeling really proud of myself. I did it. I really did it. It was so scary but I did it. I crossed over that frightening swinging bridge.

I still hadn't looked down while I was on the bridge. "Can I do it again, alone?" I asked as soon as we stepped off of the bridge.

"We can , but you can't go alone." And off we went over and back across the bridge again, this time stopping in the middle to look at distant bottom. I was still afraid but my desire to do it again won out. I had thought that crossing a bridge on foot wouldn't be a big deal, but it was the hardest thing I had ever done. It was my first experience in conquering my fear, my gut wrenching, nauseating fear, and I had successfully done it.

As we walked back across the parking lot, Dad asked me if I was glad that I had done it in spite of my fear, and I said a triumphant "YES." When we reached the car, the old man came out and asked me if I had walked across the bridge. "Yes", I replied. "Twice."

"Well, good for you," he said. "There haven't been too many little girls who have done what you did. Or that many adults, for that matter." The man went back to the shed, came back and handed me a brand new bumper sticker reading "I walked across the mile high swing bridge at Grandfather Mountain."