



Photo by Hugh Morton

A Ritch Tradition

A Scot in the Carolina Highlands

Story by Randy Johnson

On April 1, 1973, with an inch of snow on the cold spring ground, a High Country tradition was born. On that day Harvey Ritch opened Everything Scottish, Ltd., the import shop in the stone tolbooth at the then sparsely developed intersection of NC Highway 105 and 184.

Now enjoying a perfect pairing in Linville with the offices of the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games and Gathering of Scottish Clans, this fixture of the area is much more than a purveyor of all things Caledonian. It's a unique, hit-the-brakes and pull-off the-road shop featuring a wide range of kilts, clothing, clan memorabilia, resource information and even UK foods. And the owner himself is an icon of sorts.

Harvey is nothing less than a major force in the now-widespread celebration of Scottish culture in the South and beyond. Harvey is the High Country's Pipe Major—and much more.

He has instructed and inspired more than a generation of bagpipers and personally founded a few bagpipe bands.

One of them, our own Grandfather Mountain Highlanders—co-founded with Agnes MacRae Morton—is among the best in the world in its grade. In addition, several of the better pipers and drummers in the United States have come up through the ranks playing with—and learning from—Harvey. And through his years of support for the region's fledgling highland games, the number of such events in the South has grown from a few to nearly 40, with 8 or 9 in North Carolina.

Harvey had a journalism degree from UNC-Chapel Hill and was selling advertising for *Modern Bride* magazine when he launched his shop in Charlotte in 1971. Six years earlier, he had learned to play the pipes, at age 35, from Jack Smith and late pipe major Sandy Jones.

"I don't know what sparked it," Harvey said. "I'd seen the movie *Gunga Din*, and Hollywood had hired the spectacular Cameron Highlanders Pipe Band. I just loved pipe music and wanted to learn."

Harvey and Agnes MacRae Morton co-founded the Grandfather Mountain Highlanders in 1974, and the band won a Southern Championship in 1975 when the average age of band members was 16. The Highlanders has had more than 200 members over the years and can boast a significant, longtime lineup of topnotch pipers. Photo by Hugh Morton



Harvey got involved with the Charlotte Caledonian Pipe Band. It's said someone heard he liked bagpipe music and contacted him. He later launched the Charlotte Scottish Pipe Band, that "people still say was the best band to come out of the South," said Sally Warburton, president and business manager for the Grandfather Mountain Highlanders and the only person, other than Harvey, who has been active with the band since its founding.

Harvey took off for the mountains in the early 1970s, enticed by an offer from Agnes MacRae Morton and Julian Morton to build a classic Scottish tollbooth structure for his shop at the Invershiel development, now known as Tynecastle.

"I can't tell you how many thousands of times I had to tell people that building was not, never was and never will be a church," Harvey said.

He often wore a kilt in the store "until the socks started itching the hell out of my legs," Harvey said with a laugh.

When Harvey and Agnes MacRae Morton founded the Grandfather Mountain Highlanders in 1974, the Grandfather Highland Games kicked in some initial funding. He tried at first to interest



Harvey Ritch is widely considered the forefather of piping in the South. The number and quality of today's regional bands can be traced to him, and visitors to his shop often have no idea that Harvey virtually invented the Scottish music scene in the South. People he has trained have taken the music back to Scotland.

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After three relocations, Everything Scottish now calls Linville home. But that hasn't been easy either. In 2004, Hurricanes Frances and Ivan so completely flooded Harvey's shop that it had to be demolished and burned. For two years, the shop operated in a trailer-type structure, but last summer moved into a new building below the offices of the Grandfather Games. Photo by Ken Ketchie

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local schools in sponsoring the band, but with more traditional music programs of their own, none of the schools was interested.

But Harvey persevered. His teaching efforts accelerated with the band's growing success; it won a Southern Championship in 1975 when the average age of band members was 16.

And while he enthusiastically encourages people's interest in learning to play, Harvey doesn't take advantage of their lack of knowledge.

Harvey has weekly encounters with people who "want to learn to play bagpipes," said Sally. "They come into his shop and he could sell hundreds of \$800 bagpipes to people who'll never learn to play—but he doesn't. He'll sell them a practice chanter, a tutor book, and after an informal lesson, he'll try to hook them up with a teacher where they live."

One walk-in Harvey didn't send away with a practice chanter was Gordon Warburton. "I hadn't played the pipes in years," said Gordon, a supervising wildlife biologist for the NC Wild-



Harvey listens as Rebecca Witt, his student of five years, plays the pipes inside Everything Scottish. Rebecca is a student at Lees-McRae, the president of the honor society and the college's official piper. "You can't overemphasize Harvey's influence as a youth teacher," said Gordon Warburton, a member of the Grandfather Mountain Highlanders. "He has a real talent for working with kids." Photo by Ken Ketchie

life Resources Commission, "so I dropped into Everything Scottish to pick up some reeds. Harvey looked at me and asked, 'You play the bagpipes?' I said yes and the next thing he asked was, 'Do you want to play in a bagpipe band?' Didn't miss a beat."

That was 1985 and Gordon joined the band and met Sally, his future wife, who plays bass drum for the band. Gordon has just ended a ten-year tenure as the Grandfather Mountain Highlander's Pipe Major. The couple's 13-year-old son Andrew plays, too.

"It's no exaggeration to call Harvey the forefather of piping in the South," Gordon said. "The bands you see today and the quality you hear out there are all branches of a regional tradition that can be traced back to him. In a lot of ways, he's the roots of that tree. His contribution is irreplaceable. People go into his shop and may not realize that he largely invented the current scene.

"You also can't overemphasize Harvey's influence as a youth teacher," Gordon continued. "He has a real talent for working with kids. Granted Harvey can be a buzz saw at times, but if you get used to that, you make a great piper. And

he's helped start a variety of young 'feeder bands' that bring kids in. A lot of what he does happens behind the scenes."

The Highlanders—the band has had more than 200 members over the years—can boast a significant, longtime lineup of topnotch pipers. Their names and contributions would take another article, but among them are Bert Mitchell, Donny Kelemen and Scott McLeod, the Highlanders pipe

major from 1994 to 1996 and now considered the number one professional piper in the nation.

John Shell also makes that list. He came to Harvey from a previous teacher, joined the Highlanders at age 12 in 1977 and stayed until 1994. Over the

years, John won first place "Champion of Champions" finishes in both Grade I and II from the Eastern United States Pipe Band Association.

Now a junior high school science teacher at Cloudland High School in Roan Mountain, John lives in Elizabethton, teaches pipes and plays frequently at private gigs. "I never dreamed playing the pipes would be something I'd do every day," he said. "But that's the norm. Harvey's pipers never seem to leave piping if they've been in the band.

"I don't know what sparked it," Harvey said. "I'd seen the movie *Gunga Din*, and Hollywood had hired the spectacular Cameron Highlanders Pipe Band. I just loved pipe music and wanted to learn."



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The Grandfather Highland Games began in 1956, and the rugged terrain, the wildflowers and even the weather at the MacRae Meadows setting closely resemble Kintail in Scotland's Wester Ross. One of the Games' biggest attractions is the *ceòl mòr*—the classical music of the bagpipe—and the pageantry of performers in traditional dress. Photo by Hugh Morton



Unless he's traveling to one of the region's many highland games or on one of his annual jaunts to Scotland, Harvey is in his shop, generally seated in a chair by the fireplace. The Grandfather Mountain Highlanders adopted the MacRae tartan, and Harvey's classic wing chair at the shop is covered in the MacRae tartan cloth. Photo by Ken Ketchie

"Harvey has the drive and determination to create an excellent piper," John continued. "He was always good about referring people to other teachers and classes, as well as the North American Academy of Piping and Drumming in Valle Crucis." That program, founded in 1971, celebrates its 36th year in 2007.

John credits Harvey's approach to teaching for part of his success. "My playing started out with a lot of humbling experiences and failures in competition," he said, "but learning from Harvey could be humbling too. He'd tell you exactly where you were going wrong. As disagreeable as that could occasionally be, he had the goal of developing great piping, in individuals and the entire South—and I'd say he reached it."

Sally seconds that gruffer side of Harvey's personality. "He can be a curmudgeon and a bit grumpy. He's just a character—a real piece of work! But he's the most generous, kind person I've ever met."

One aspect of that generosity is Harvey's philanthropic side. His continuous moral and financial support, including scholarship money for formal training programs, has benefited his students, many pipe bands and fledgling highland games as well.

And then there's Harvey's other standout success—his shop. At 34, the longevity of Everything Scottish is an achievement. "Drive 105," said Sally, "and notice how many businesses have come and gone in that period of time. It's amazing with such a niche business."

But staying on Highway 105 hasn't been easy. Harvey was considering moving the shop off that main thoroughfare and asked Hugh Morton what he thought. "Hugh said 'don't get off 105,' so I didn't," Harvey said.



After three relocations from his first shop—he has been at two locations in Foscoe—Everything Scottish now calls Linville home. But that hasn't been easy either. Hurricanes Frances and Ivan in 2004 so completely flooded his shop that it had to be demolished and burned. For two years, the shop operated in a trailer-type structure. Only last summer did Everything Scottish move into its new building in Linville below the offices of the Grandfather Games.

Unless he's traveling to one of the region's many highland games, where he sets up a tent to show his wares ten or eleven times a year, or on one of his annual jaunts to Scotland, Harvey is in his shop along with manager Donna Witt.

Believe it or not, Harvey had never been to Scotland until the year 2000, and he has returned every year but one ever since. "That's pretty amazing, but people he's trained have been taking the music back to Scotland," Gordon said.

At this point in his career, Harvey revels in his love of the mountains and in his appreciation for good food.

"I treasure the weather," he said, and the people—"the natives especially. They're honest, sincere people, and that's refreshing. Up here, the Buchanans pronounce their name 'buck cannon,' like they do in Scotland." He loves the High Country, but laments, "It's being overdeveloped."

Through Harvey's years of support for the region's fledgling highland games, the number of such events in the South has grown from a few to nearly 40, with 8 or 9 in North Carolina. Photo by Hugh Morton

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The Grandfather Mountain Highlanders is among the best in the world in its grade. In addition, several of the better pipers and drummers in the United States have come up through the ranks playing with—and learning from—Harvey. The band has produced two recordings that are available at Everything Scottish. Photo by Hugh Morton

Harvey eats out often and is an inveterate and informal reviewer of the High Country's restaurants. If the rule is "one satisfied or dissatisfied customer will tell ten others," the rule with Harvey easily morphs to a hundred or more. Endless tourist questions give him a bully pulpit, and he answers with the blunt frankness that characterizes the man.

He often had lunch at the Grandfather Nature Museum snack bar with the mountain's late owner Hugh Morton. He sorely misses the quaint Swiss specialty restaurant in Banner Elk called Heidi's, but lavishes praise on the Thursday night seafood buffet at Linville's Eseeola Lodge and on Louisiana Purchase in Banner Elk. He loves many other restaurants too, mostly modest eateries, such as Henry's in Linville and Christa's in Pineola—the latter a "honey, darlin' kind of place," he said.

Harvey has shared many memorable meals with his students after piping successes on the road.

Gordon said, "Harvey's philosophy is 'the pipe band that dines together, stays together.' We'd celebrate our victories with a meal, and going to dinner with Harvey always made it special. You hear all the tales, sense the history of the organization."

That kind of camaraderie in Scottish culture, the fellowship around the table, with toasts to music and success at

playing it with excellence, is in microcosm what Harvey's efforts have given to thousands in the South.

Whether recommending a hometown highland games to a visitor or a faraway pipe instructor to a potential student, Harvey has ushered countless people, and our entire region, to a greater awareness and appreciation of what in fact is part of the cultural heritage of the High Country.

A local denizen for decades, I'm accustomed to hearing moving bagpipe tunes in the oddest places. One summer, a few years ago after the Grandfather Games, I was at a friend's house at Grandfather Lake in Linville and saw John Shell step up to a rocky wall by the lake, pipes in hand. As John's resonant melody echoed across the lake and up toward the sunlit peaks of Grandfather Mountain, I couldn't help but think of Harvey.

I raised a Scottish ale to the High Country's Pipe Major. He has inspired much of the music that echoes all around us.

Randy Johnson once helped Harvey Ritch move his Everything Scottish shop to a new location. He's still sore, but keeps hiking to write books such as his new 2nd edition of *Hiking North Carolina*.