

The Morse Museum

by Philip M. Morse Jr.

Ira Herbert Morse or Grampy as my brother, Bob and I knew him, or I.H. as he was known to his friends, possessed a supreme self-confidence. He did many things that mere mortal men only dream about. His business career was in the retail shoe business where he bought failing shoe stores and turned them around or closed them but always with a profit. His success made him a millionaire early in life and he was able to retire from active management of the shoe business by the age of 50, so he could indulge in world travels, big game hunting and collecting world curios. His collecting soon became a storage problem. The result was the Morse Museum that became a tourist attraction for many years in the small rural town of Warren in central NH.

He was born in Chester NH on Jan 4, 1875 and after his mother, Luella Helen Merrill, died in 1888, he and his 3 sisters went to Warren NH to live with his grandfather, Ira Merrill. He attended the Warren Village School through the 8th grade when his formal education ended at age 14 in 1889. Warren was thereafter his hometown that he would return to in later years. He lived there in the summer months and traveled during the winter months. During the 30's & 40's he maintained a house on Andover Street in Lowell MA.

In Warren, his grandfather supplemented his formal education and formed his future by reading. Once a year, a book peddler came to town and his grandfather instructed him to pick out something to read to augment his school studies. He picked out "Stanley in Africa" and "Heroes of the Dark Continent" and they filled the boy with dreams that would shape his life. Warren life was a farm life and in his imagination a trip to the pasture to drive in the cows became a safari to hunt the buffalo.

After ending his formal education. in the eighth grade, he found a job in a Bristol NH general store as a clerk where he stayed a year. Then the big city called and he took a job in Boston at RH White in the drapery dept as an interior decorator. He managed to save and developed a strong desire to be in business for himself. The shoe business would be his life vocation starting in partnership with Beckman and Moran in Pawtucket RI in 1898. His partners eventually bought him out to his gain and he bought a bankrupt shoe store in Nashua NH. In a series of purchases of bankrupt stores he built a successful chain of shoe stores in New England.

I.H. married Lillian Little, the daughter of attorney and historian William Little on Sept 7 1898 in Warren. He was 23 she was 27. Son Herbert was born in 1900 and Philip was born Aug 15 1902. Lillian was a Christian Scientist and when Herbert was accidentally burned in Oct 1906 her faith was tested. She would not allow any medical treatment for his burns and she prayed. When he died a week later, she never recovered and Ira never forgave her. In 1914 she entered a mental institution where she died in 1955. Philip went to live with Lillian and Will Gordon in Warren where he grew up. She was his mother's second cousin.

I.H. was given to doing things that others only fantasize about. In the early days of the automobile he drove a 45 HP Pope-Hartford with his wife and a mechanic from ocean to ocean. They left for Los Angeles in May and returned in Oct of 1909 via Seattle Washington. That was before there were highways or even local maps. They replaced 10 tires and made numerous repairs in the 10,000-mile trip. He participated in auto racing or rallies and in 1916 drove his Cadillac to the top of Mt. Washington on the new auto road.

In 1922, he took his first "Cook's Tour" a trip around the world on the Steamship Franconia, leaving the management of the chain of shoe stores in the hands of the returned WWI veteran, Bill Wood. It was the first of 15 around the world trips he would take, 3 by ship and 12 by air. Being interested in shoes he began collecting shoes from around the world at every port where the ship stopped. He would go ashore and buy the shoes off the feet of the natives much to the annoyance of others on the cruise. The collection eventually grew to over 300 pairs as he added to his collection on each trip.

One of the stops was in Mombassa in what was then called British East Africa, where I.H. looked into big game hunting safari. The first safari would wait until his son, Phil, finished Dartmouth College. Phil graduated in 1925 and then the first Safari with serious hunting and "trophy bagging" could get underway in 1926-27. In those days, the "natives" were in tribes living in cow manure huts. The cities of Nairobi and Mombassa were towns with dirt roads interconnected by a railroad. That first safari was planned for 3 months but lasted 7 as the greenhorns spent lots of money learning the ropes. It is documented in their book "Yankee in Africa" that was published in 1936.

In 1919 he bought land in Warren that Cold Brook ran through, and he built a dam and excavated a pond that he then stocked with native trout. Then in 1923 he bought an abutting large house from Fred Merrill. There were several other houses in the area, two on each side of the road. When two houses on the west side of the road fortuitously burned, the two houses on the east side were moved across the road to clear the area. In 1927 the 30 foot by 90 foot construction was started for the Morse Museum. Using the idea of constructing a building of river stones from the Libby Museum in Wolfeboro, N.H. using river washed stones from the Baker River. The Morse Museum opened July 4, 1928.

I.H. obtained a Reno divorce in 1930 and then married Julie Burke Mahoney in 1931. She had a literary inclination and it was she who edited or wrote the book "Yankee in Africa" and the ten or so museum booklets that told the various stories. Julie had visions of a social life and to that purpose converted The Gale Barn on an abutting property into what we called The Studio Barn. After Julie passed away in Feb 1942. The Barn then became a summer bunkhouse to house visiting relatives and guests.

I have vivid childhood memories of following Grampy around in the museum as he told his stories to groups of visitors who were lucky enough to visit when he was there. It was not difficult to get him started. He was always telling his stories. When he traveled, he wrote long letters of his adventures, many of which were reprinted in the Lowell Sun, in Lowell Mass., his home while in business. Many of his stories are documented in booklets that were for sale in the museum and were periodically revised after each trip in the 30's. He also wrote a book "Yankee in Africa" but they were probably more the product of his second wife, Julie, who was an aspiring writer and more conscious of the need to record the stories. He married his 3rd wife Lillian Dunbar June 24, 1943.

IH had several quirky habits. He had a thing about salt shakers. They had to flow or they got reamed out. In a restaurant or as a guest visiting a friend, salt shakers got reamed out. The other was bread crusts were always trimmed off. Roast beef was always served rare. He had a freezer stocked with roast beef. Once we had a dinner when it was served with the center still frozen.

IH was a world traveler and big game hunter in the model of Teddy Roosevelt. That was the era when big game hunting was a respectable sport and where “bagging” the last of a species before it was extinct would have been a triumph. The Morse Museum was a creature of an earlier time. At its end it was no longer politically correct.

The Morse Museum was the epitome of his chutzpah. It was a building that ought to be thought of as a work of art. It is very fragile in that it was built of river washed boulders from the local Baker River and has no internal, reinforcing structure other than the wood interior. But in all these years, no cracks or signs of weakness in the building are evident. It was built in 1927 in Warren N.H. to house his collection of world curios and big game trophies. It opened to the public on July 4, 1928. For the next 63 years it opened soon after Memorial Day and closed soon after Labor Day. IH traveled the world during the winter months. He died in 1960 and the museum was then run by his 3rd wife Lillian, until she died in 1973. It was then operated by his son Philip M. Morse. Its last full season was 1991, when he died. The contents and building were then auctioned in Aug 1992.