

# NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

## Lucius B. Morse

*Envisioned and preserved Chimney Rock*

By Amanda Wisz

Standing on top of Chimney Rock, hundreds of feet above Hickory Nut Gorge, Dr. Lucius B. Morse felt a wave of inspiration. "He envisioned a wonderful attraction," according to Todd Morse, Lucius Morse's great grand-nephew and former manager of the Chimney Rock Park. Lucius' dream came true. Today, Chimney Rock serves North Carolina as a distinctive state park.

Each year since its opening as a state park in 2007, a quarter of a million tourists have taken 470 stairs or a 30-second elevator ride to the top of Chimney Rock. The view makes either trip worthwhile. Few visitors, however, consider how difficult their journey might be without one determined doctor from Missouri.

### Moving from Illinois to the rugged NC mountains

Dr. Morse was born in 1871 in Warrensburg, IL. His father, Lemuel R. Morse, was a farmer, but Lucius took a different path, graduating from Chicago Medical College at age 26. He worked in Cook County Hospital in Chicago before moving to the St. Louis area. There, his health, and subsequently his life, took a major turn when he contracted tuberculosis. Most doctors then believed that moving to a milder climate could mitigate the disease, so Morse moved to a sanatorium in Hendersonville, NC.

Morse frequently went on trail rides exploring the Hickory Nut Gorge area, not far from Hendersonville. He happened upon Chimney Rock during one ride. Morse paid the landowners 25 cents to take him up the rugged face of the mountain by donkey and the 315 feet to the top of the rock.

Morse wrote to his twin brothers, Hiram (Todd Morse's great-great grandfather) and Asahel, describing the area and his ideas for development. "Dr. Morse was the dreamer, the wide-open visionary, and the twins were businessmen," Todd Morse said. In his letters, Lucius Morse must have captured the 75-mile view and its natural beauty from the rock at Hickory Nut Gorge because his brothers soon joined him in North Carolina. Together, they purchased Chimney Rock and the surrounding 64 acres for \$5,000 from then owner, Jerome Freeman.

### Blasting a way to the top of Chimney Rock

Although Freeman had opened the rock to the public for years, it was not easily accessible. The Rocky Broad River separated the mountain road from the main roads. The mountain road was rudimentary at best and couldn't take visitors to the top.

"The brothers wanted everyone to be

able to get up on the mountain," said Mary Jaeger-Gale, current general manager of Chimney Rock. They set out to construct a bridge across the Rocky Broad River and an adequate road up the mountain. Both tasks tested the Morses' stick-to-itiveness. In 1916, only 12 days after the park was incorporated and dedicated, a hurricane flooded the river, and the new bridge was swept away. "It didn't dampen their spirits," Jaeger-Gale said. They rebuilt the bridge immediately and continued working on the road. "Everything was (and is) a monumental task," Jaeger-Gale said.

The road extended two miles before engineers concluded that the topography was too steep to use automobiles to clear the last mile to the base of Chimney Rock. Hiram described in a letter that "the tremendous block of granite as big as houses" would be impossible to blast apart without a water source to power the steam-driven drills.

Todd Morse explained how his predecessors convinced the engineers to push on for one more mile. First, the brothers conducted their own engineering study, driving an automobile up and down different grades of hills. Once the engineers were convinced, the Morse brothers purchased an extra 44 acres nearby that included a spring they could use to power the steam drills. Within a few months, the road was ready.

### Luring visitors with a lake and town

Lucius Morse's next step was creating Lake Lure. "He wanted to create what would have been the largest resort in the eastern United States," Todd Morse said. The three brothers founded Chimney Rock Mountains, Inc. and purchased Logan House, the largest inn in the area, to serve as the operation center. Today, Jim Proctor, former mayor of Lake Lure and a descendant of the original owners, runs the inn, called Pine Gables Inn.

Proctor spent his boyhood years vacationing at Lake Lure and thumbing through old records in the town hall. He said Lucius Morse and his wife, Betty, came up with the plan to dam the Rocky Broad River and develop a lake. The name Lake Lure is believed to be Mrs. Morse's idea. Chimney Rock Mountains, Inc. acquired 8,000 acres in the area and began construction of the dam in 1925. By 1927, it was complete, the lake was filled and the town was incorporated.

### Dealing with adversity and realizing the dream

Then, the 1929 stock market crash curtailed the growth of Chimney Rock Park and the resort. Chimney Rock Mountains, Inc. sold off nearly all its land and left the lake and the dam to the town of Lake Lure. Chimney Rock Park, however, was saved and remained



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open to the public. Lucius Morse settled with his wife in the Hickory Nut Gorge area and managed the park until the early 1930s. Despite the Depression, the three Morse brothers continued developing the park. It slowly grew as a popular attraction.

In his autobiography, Hiram Morse committed only a half page to his work at Chimney Rock. Todd Morse said Hiram did that mostly to "bust his brother's chops for not making any money off of it; Lucius wasn't the businessman Hiram wanted him to be." In the end, the failed economy slowed the development and actually preserved the park.

Todd Morse was the first blood relative to manage the park after Lucius Morse. Like his great-grand Uncle Lucius, Todd made preservation of the park a priority, and like his uncle, Todd was an unlikely businessman. At age 26, Todd arrived at Chimney Rock with a newly-earned master's degree in business to manage what had always been his family's vacation spot. Todd's success proved that he was just the person for the job.

In 2007, the state of North Carolina purchased Chimney Rock Park for \$24 million, making it a state park. Charles Peek, State Park Public Information Officer, maintains that the Morse family members developed the park with what he called a "light footprint." Today, rare habitats and geological formations remain in the same condition as when Dr. Morse first rode through the gorge. "I think the three brothers would be pleased that what they loved about it ultimately got protected," Todd Morse said.

Chimney Rock Park was Lucius Morse's vision, Jaeger-Gale said. "Building it was a daunting task that he didn't give up on." She believes that North Carolina may not have ever incorporated Chimney Rock as a state park had the Morse family not introduced it and cared for it for so many years.

Lucius Morse died in 1946 and was buried at Chimney Rock Baptist Church.

"There's a great view of Chimney Rock from his headstone," Todd Morse said. "It reads: 'He loved the mountains. He lived on the heights.' He was definitely a dreamer."

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