

The Limestone Man

In a recent road trip, I rediscovered Whitehall's Jefferson Valley Museum and was happy to chat with its curator, Roy. Among the wonderful items on display was a tribute to Dan Morrison and the Lewis and Clark Caverns. Of course, Mr. Morrison has close ties to our end of the Jefferson valley too.

Donald "Dan" A. Morrison was born in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia in June 1852. Early in his life he was involved in various limestone related business, first in Rockland, Maine. He spent a number of years in New York, and became an ardent Mason. He attained the "sublime degree of Master Mason on April 23, 1873." He later moved on to Wyoming and finally to Montana. He continued his Masonic duties and was a charter member of Mystic Tie Lodge 17 (of Whitehall) in 1897.

Morrison started the Lime and Flux Company and had an extensive mining operations on the Jefferson River, just a few miles downstream from Whitehall, known as Limespur. A small railroad spur line was built to accommodate loading railcars. And not far away, was a most wonderful natural delight, the Lewis and Clark Caverns.

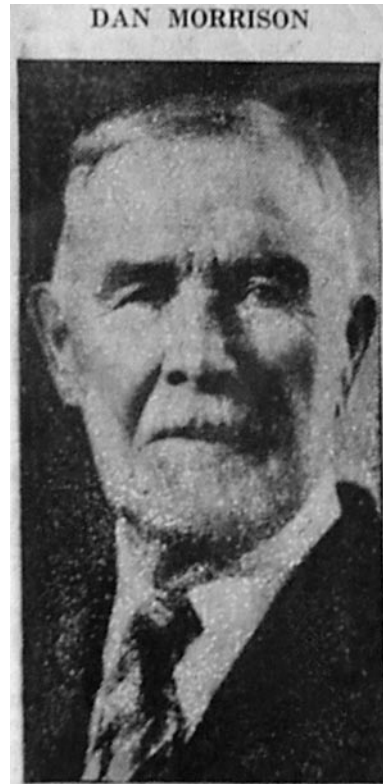
According to the Gold West Country web-site, *These caverns were actually discovered by two area ranchers who were hunting in the area. On a November day in 1892, these two men were hunting near the entrance to the cave. What caught their eyes on that particular day was an area on the hillside which was clear of snow, although the rest of the area was completely covered. Upon further investigation, they discovered a hole in the rock, which turned out to be the opening to the caverns.*

Dan Morrison, a local area miner was the first individual to begin giving public tours of the caves. He built wooden staircases in the caverns to improve accessibility. Some of these stairs can still be seen on tours today. He named the cave "Limespur Cave".

Although Tom Williams may have found the cave, Morrison styled himself the discoverer. Jefferson Valley Museum Curator Roy Millegan believes that Morrison felt that he and his nephews, using mining techniques, had "discovered" more of the cavern complex than anyone else.

Whether seeking more caves or more lime, Morrison made a survey of the limestone around the headwaters of the Missouri starting about 1906. Ever the promoter, there are indications that Morrison formed the Butte Cement Company to begin building a cement plant at the three forks. However, when money became a problem, new investors were invited in, which led to new management and a new company name, Three Forks Portland Cement Co.

In the process of getting a post office at the construction site, Morrison is credited with the naming of Trident, having discarded "Portland and "Cementville." He was Trident's first Post Master. For a time, he was a salesman for the product. Today, the cement plant at Trident, Montana now operated by Holcim (US), has been in existence for nearly 100 years.



About 1910 or 1911, Morrison and some of the original investors of Butte Cement Co. formed the Montana Concrete or Moncrete Company, purchased 125 acres between Logan and Three Forks and built a cement block manufacturing plant. The bricks turned out were of a wide variety of colors. The plant experienced a fire in 1915, but was rebuilt with newer equipment. It closed sometime in the early 20's.

Morrison died of heart failure in 1932 at his home in Whitehall and was buried with full Masonic Honors in the Bozeman cemetery. At the time he was the government's appointed custodian of Morrison Cave. It was several years after his death that the government developed the cave and opened it to the public.

Morrison's exploration of the Caverns and his passion for opening it up to the public has given us a national treasure. His promotion and investment into the limestone deposits near the headwaters started one of the oldest businesses in the valley that continues to contribute to our economic success. Clearly, "Dan" Morrison's influence and discoveries still affect us today.



Limespur Mine a mile west of the entrance to the Lewis and Clark Caverns.