

Morgan Ranch

Mary Dee and Allen Dodge



This is a little of the history of the Morgan Ranch on Sulphur Creek where it meets the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho's Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness.

Archeologists have dated some native artifacts found here to at least 5000 years ago. Before that, glaciers slowly ground the surrounding granite peaks to sand and rounded boulders. So our story is a little more recent and maybe not as dramatic but, still, interesting...

Ben Morgan was born in the Dalles, Oregon in 1883. He grew up ranching, breaking horses for the US Cavalry. At the age of 20, riding home with broken ribs, he saw a gentleman in a small carriage, nattily dressed, tapping his horse to get along and Ben said to himself, "That's what I want to do!" The gentleman was the town doctor.

Ben went back to finish high school and put himself through the University of Chicago and medical school. Fascinated with anesthesia, he developed pioneering devices for delivering surgical gasses. Dr. Ben sold his inventions to hospitals all over the country, delivering and demonstrating them himself. He even devised an oven on his exhaust manifold where he could bake a potato while driving rather than stop for a meal. Dr. Ben also worked as a military surgeon and in espionage.

Ben met and married Freda Melcher of Chicago in 1929. She was 15 and he was 46. Enamored of her intelligence, he bought her a car and insisted she drive out to the College of Idaho for more education. When she returned and expressed an interest in his anesthesia practice, he sent her by ship to Heidelberg, Germany for another year of scientific studies. She returned to Chicago and enrolled at Northwestern University where she completed her medical doctorate. Specializing in anesthesia, she began her lifelong career.

In 1946, Dr. Ben took a pack trip in the Sawtooth mountains of Idaho. He'd been longing to get back to the mountain west. The leader of the trip was a woman, Pearl Hornback, who insisted that he take a look at a ranch for sale nearby. They flew there, landing in a hayfield alongside a Zenith biplane. Ben bought the ranch and hired Pearl's husband Marv to begin building a dude ranch they'd call Sulphur Creek Ranch. In time, the Morgans bought the neighboring property, calling it at first Sulphur Creek Lower Ranch and finally, Morgan Ranch.

Dr. Ben laid out both ranch houses similarly, stepping off the corners and building both with vertical logs as the Lodgepole pine of the area tapered too much for horizontal construction. He built hydroelectric plants at both ranches, too, but at Morgan, he utilized the natural hot springs for radiant heating of the floors. Everything necessary for building came by air to Sulphur Creek via Bill Woods' Stinson Trimotor, Johnson Flying Service's DC3 or any number of freight haulers in Boise. From SCR, the materials were loaded on wagons and driven down by 4-horse teams.

Morgan Ranch airfield, completed in 1954, was constructed in sections. Originally running in a dog-leg a quarter of a mile south, it finally ended up a straight north-south orientation, 2600', graded, crowned and ditched.