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Summer 2014

# Trolling spoons & baseball: The life, lures, and legacy of Charles H. Morse

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# The National Fishing Lure Collectors Club MAGAZINE

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Top Secret Decoys / A Spearingly Good Day / Just Above the Rabbit Hole



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# Trolling Spoons & Baseball

## *The Life, Lures, and Legacy of Charles H. Morse*

What does the game of baseball have to do with the manufacture of trolling spoons? In the case of Charles H. Morse - almost everything, because Morse was both a commercial lure maker and a professional ball player.



Fig. 1. Map showing the Twin Cities of Auburn and Lewiston, southern Maine, in 1908. Lake Auburn, Morse's favorite fishing destination, is located northwest of the Twin Cities but still within the town limits of Auburn. Note the fish hatchery (red arrow) which Morse refers to in his post card advertisement. (Figure 3.) (U.S. Geological Survey topo maps.)

C.H. Morse of Auburn, Maine is listed under "Lure Manufacturers Before 1901" on page 282 in Arlan Carter's book, *19th Century Fishing Lures: A Collector's Guide to U.S. Lures Manufactured Prior to 1901* (2000). This listing does not state what kind of fishing lure was made by Morse, nor when he p100s, and Web sites (including, in this case, baseball records).

Charles H. Morse (1868-1931) started playing minor league baseball in Providence, Rhode Island early in 1891 when he was 23 years old. Later that year, Morse moved north to the Twin Cities of Lewiston-Auburn, Maine (Fig. 1). Here, on the banks of the Androscoggin River, Morse played for Lewiston's team in 1891, 1896, and 1901. In 1899, Morse played in New York State for the Rochester Typewriters while continuing to live in the Twin Cities, maintaining his Maine residency. Morse was noticeably older than most other team members (Fig. 2), and his teammates fondly called him "Gramps," "Grandpa," "Pa" and "Pops."

Despite his age, Morse threw an exceptional "twister" (i.e., curveball) and his fastball was legendary because it became faster as a game wore on. A Rochester, New York newspaper declared that "Morse comes pretty near to being the premier pitcher of this league." Morse was a left-hand pitcher and over the years played for approximately 10 teams. Around 1906, after approximately 15 years in the

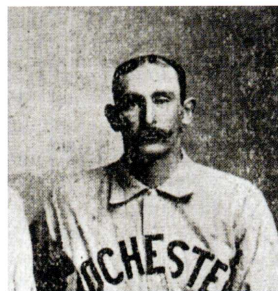


Fig. 2. "Pop" Morse as he appeared in an 1899 newspaper photograph of the Rochester (New York) Typewriter's baseball team. Morse is in the far right of the back row of the team picture, holding a baseball that signified his role as the team's pitcher. Note that Morse, age 31 at the time of this picture, was noticeably older than his teammates. (Courtesy of Craig Brown.)



minor leagues, Morse retired. The last team he played for was the Ilion Team, located near Troy, New York. From 1907 until a few years before his death, lure making and guiding were Morse's main income sources (Fig. 3).

Morse was born on December 24, 1868 in Charlestown, Massachusetts. His parents were Charles A., and Lydia G., Morse. As a two-year-old child, in 1870, he lived with his parents and paternal grandparents in Stoneham, Massachusetts. Morse was educated in eastern Massachusetts and, as mentioned above, moved to Maine in 1891. In the late 1800s, and for many decades after, Auburn and Lewiston were centers for shoe manufacturing in the U.S.A. When Morse first moved to Maine, he worked in local shoe factories during the non-baseball season. The lure making and guiding businesses developed a few years later. In the spring of 1902, Morse married Lena M. Johnson. Lena was born in Auburn and became a shoemaker while still in her teens. She was nine years older than her husband. The couple travelled to Morse's hometown of Stoneham, Massachusetts for their marriage, but they quickly returned to Maine.

The Morses, starting in the early 1920s, owned a modest home on Hampshire Street in Auburn. They never had children. Charles Morse continued making Lake Auburn spoons at his home until 1927 when his health failed. In

1928, at age 60, Morse was admitted to the State Mental Hospital in Augusta, Maine. Approximately two years later Lena gave up the Auburn home and moved to Lewiston where she roomed at the Marcotte Home, a facility for the elderly run by the Catholic Church. Here she died in 1938. On 31 August 1931, Morse died at the State Mental Hospital in Augusta. His death record states that he died from a "General paralysis of the insane." Because it's likely that he was exposed to lead and copper fumes for much of his adult life due to his lure making, one can only speculate to what degree heavy metal poisoning contributed to his death. Charles H. Morse is buried in the North Auburn Cemetery, less than a mile north of the inlet to the namesake of his lures, Lake Auburn.

C. H. Morse's reputation as a lure maker was local, and most of his Lake Auburn Trolling Spoons are found today in northern New England, although I have found Lake Auburns from California to Maine. Morse's spoons are almost always stamped, but the markings are not uniform across all spoons (Fig. 4). Lake Auburns were fashioned from copper with almost all of their blades having their underside coated with a thin layer of lead (Fig. 5). Some Lake Auburn spoons were made of brass; these are much less common than their copper cousins (Fig. 6). A key characteristic of Morse's work is the long, brass shaft on which the blade

## CHAS. H. MORSE

16 Blake Street

LEWISTON, ME,

*Registered Guide, State of Maine*

Lake Auburn is one of the best salmon lakes in the State of Maine. In the months of May and June, the fishing is at its best. The Lake Auburn Fish Hatchery is situated on this lake, and every year, from seventy thousand to one hundred thousand salmon and trout are liberated in its waters. The salmon are good fighters, and they average in weight from 1 1-2 lbs. to 12 lbs. Any one wishing information in regard to boating or fishing here, will receive prompt attention by writing

Yours respectfully,

CHAS. H. MORSE,

Guide



Lake Auburn Salmon, 10 1-4 lbs.

Fig. w3. Charles H. Morse in his fishing gear holding a large land-locked salmon caught in Lake Auburn. This post card was made around 1910, approximately 4 years after he retired from minor league baseball. When Morse first moved to Maine in 1891, he lived in Lewiston but later he and his wife relocated to nearby Auburn (see figure 1). After he ceased playing baseball, Morse spent most of his work-time guiding and making trolling spoons. (Courtesy of Dave Fuller.)





Fig. 4. Morse's Lake Auburn trolling spoons are usually stamped with (1) the maker's name and home town (illustration on left), or (2) the lure's name and size (right). Less commonly, Lake Auburn spoons are stamped with both Morse's name and town (on the top of the blade's upper side) and the lure's name and size. (On the bottom of the blade's upper side.) (Author's collection.)



Fig. 6. Lake Auburn spoons made of brass, as shown here, are harder to find than Morse's copper spoons. Note that these spoons are only stamped with the lure's name and size; Morse's name does not appear on either example. Note that the larger spoon has one porcelain and one fixed metal bead whereas the smaller has two metal beads, the lower one being attached to the shaft. The smaller spoon is two inches long. (Author's collection.)



LAKE AUBURN SPOONS		
(Not illustrated)		
Used for attractors for deep trolling. Spoons are made of copper and are furnished with brass wire hangers.		
No.	Size	Each
1	4¼ inches x 1½ inches	\$.75
2	4 inches x 1¾ inches	.60
3	3½ inches x 1½ inches	.50
4	3¼ inches x 1½ inches	.40
5	2¾ inches x 1½ inches	.40
6	2¼ inches x 1¼ inches	.40

Fig. 7. The sizes and prices of Lake Auburn spoons as published in the T. B. Davis Tackle Catalog No. 45 (circa 1927, p. 54). T. B. Davis, located in Portland, Maine, was a hardware and sporting goods business that sold both retail and wholesale. To the best of my knowledge, Davis was the only large distributor to advertise and sell Morse's trolling spoon. (Author's collection.)



Fig. 5. Examples of Lake Auburn trolling spoons showing the spoon's upper (at top) and bottom sides. All three examples have one porcelain and one fixed metal bead; other Lake Auburn spoons have two metal beads (again, the upper one is free while the lower bead is fixed to the shaft). The bottom end of the Lake Auburn shaft is generally twisted and extends just below the blade's edge (on the far right, however, note the shaft of the smallest spoon which is untwisted). (Author's collection.)



Fig. 8. The fish-shaped Lake Auburn, like the Lake Auburn spoon, is generally found without hooks. Like other Morse spoons, the underside is lined with lead and lure's shaft has a porcelain bead stopped by a metal bead that is soldered to the shaft. These lures are all three inches long. (Author's collection.)



spins. The arm on the lower clip at the bottom end of the shaft is long, and this, combined with the loop at the shaft's bottom, results in a lower clip that is exceptionally easy to open and close, expediting the changing of hooks. Spoons stamped "Lake Auburn" come in at least three shapes. By far, the most common Lake Auburn Spoon is egg-shaped (Figs. 5 & 6). This spoon, according to one source, was made in six sizes (Fig. 7). I have seen these Morse's spoons, however, stamped from size 1 (the largest) to size 9 (the smallest). A less common form Lake Auburn Spoon, I know of only four examples, is shaped like a forage fish (Fig. 8). This fish-shaped Lake Auburn is three inches long. There is also a thin, long Lake Auburn (i.e., a pickerel blade); only one example of this spoon is known (Fig. 9, spinner on left). Finally, I know of a two-bladed spinner that had both the lower clip and the porcelain-metal beads characteristic of Morse's work. The upper blade of this spinner is copper with a lead-coated back; the lower blade is brass. Both blades are stamped "R" and while this appears to be a Morse spinner, it is not stamped Lake Auburn and thus this identification is tentative. (Fig. 9, right.)

In addition to making trolling spoons, C. H. Morse was a guide who took clients (i.e., "sports") angling and hunting. One of his favorite locations to take his sports was his beloved Lake Auburn, just a few miles north of the city. Here



Fig. 9. The third shape of the Lake Auburn Trolling Spoon, a so-called "pickerel blade" is shown on the left side of this photo. This spoon is stamped "Lake Auburn" and is a size 1. The two-blades spinner on the right has Morse's characteristics (note the long, lower clip; porcelain beads), but this spinner is only tentatively identified as made by C. H. Morse because it is not stamped Lake Auburn. (Courtesy of Ron Goddard.)

Morse and his clients trolled for lake trout and land-locked salmon as well as fished for smallmouth bass. Morse's guiding and lure making activities apparently started while he was still playing baseball. Morse played minor league baseball until his late thirties, from late spring through late summer. During the off-season of fall through early spring, he had time to guide and make lures.

I located only two advertisements for Morse's spoons, both in T. B. Davis tackle catalogs. As for his guiding business, in addition to the post card shown above I found a few listings of Morse working as a "guide" in a number of issues of the Lewiston-Auburn directories. Despite this low-profile approach to promoting his businesses, Morse's legacy as a lure maker lived on long after he died. The first maker to continue in Morse's footsteps was William H. "Bill" Burgess (1886-1967) of Minot, Maine. Minot is located a few miles west of Auburn. In 1922, Burgess moved from the western Maine town of Rumford to Minot. Burgess was a guide and had made fishing flies for clients for years before relocating to Minot. In Minot, Burgess continued tying flies and also started inventing and producing a large variety of fishing lures. He named two of his trolling spoons Bill's Combo and Bill's State-O-Maine (Fig. 10). Bill's Combo, for some unknown reason, was also made under the name of Bill's Salmo (Fig. 11). In 1927, Morse's Lake Auburn was

COMBO BLADES No. 260

The Utility spoon of polished copper outside, polished white metal inside, for any kind of fishing where a spoon can be used. These can also be made in nickel or gold plate if desired.  
No. 2—1½ in. Blade.      No. 3—2½ in. Blade.      No. 4—2½ in. Blade.

No. 260-2 Each	.50
No. 260-3 Each	.55
No. 260-4 Each	.60

STATE-O-MAINE TROLLING SPOON

A large copper spoon, for deep trolling for Salmon or Trout. It is common knowledge among fishermen that a large spoon of this type proves very successful during late season fishing for Salmon and Trout. Inside of spoon polished white metal.

No. 2—2 in.	.65
No. 3—3 in.	.70
No. 4—4 in.	.75

Fig. 10. After the death of Charles H. Morse, William H. "Bill" Burgess produced two trolling spoons strikingly similar in design to the Morse's Lake Auburn. These were Bill's Combo (upper illustration) and Bill's State-O-Maine (lower illustrations). Bill's Combo was apparently produced later under the name of Bill's Salmo. Both illustrations are from a 51-page Burgess Catalog published circa 1935. (Author's collection.)





Fig. 11. A comparison of Bill's Combo (spoon on left in both illustrations) and Bill's Salmo (right) showing that these spoons are essentially the same. Both spoons are stamped as size 2. Why Burgess produced such similar spoons under two names is unknown, but based on names used in known-date tackle catalogs, the Combo name seems to have been used before Salmo. (Author's collection.)

LAKE AUBURN SPOONS (Now State-O-Maine Spoons)			
No. 2	2 inches long	per dozen	\$4.36
3	3 inches long	per dozen	4.68
4	4 inches long	per dozen	5.00

Fig. 12 A table from the Wholesale Price List to T. B. Davis' Fishing Tackle Catalog No. 45 (1927, p. 15) stating that the Lake Auburn Spoons are now called State-O-Maine Spoons. Comparing the sizes of the spoons listed in this table to those known to be made by Morse and Burgess, the spoons listed here are not Morse's Lake Auburns Spoon, but clearly are Bill's State-O-Maine trolling spoons. (Author's collection.)



Fig. 13. Examples of Bill's State-O-Maine trolling spoon showing the spoon's upper side (left) and bottom side (right). This spoon generally had two metal beads with the lower one attached to the brass wire shaft. Like the Lake Auburn spoon, the bottom end of the shaft is generally twisted and extends just below the blade's edge, and the blade's underside in lead-coated. (Author's collection.)



Fig. 14. Examples of Bill's Salmo showing the spoon's upper side (photograph on left) and bottom side (right). Note that the brass wire shaft is not twisted at the end whereas both Morse's Lake Auburn and Burgess's State-O-Maine spoons have twisted ends. Also, the blade of Bill's Salmo (a.k.a. Combo) is more rounded and less concave than either the Lake Auburn or State-O-Maine trolling spoons. Collectors must closely examine Burgess spoons as they are lightly stamped. (Author's collection.) Salmo (above), and Bill's Combo (Fig. 9), are pointed. Also, the State-O-Maine generally has two beads on the shaft compared to one for the Combo/Salmo. (Author's collection.)



Fig. 15. A comparison of Bill's Combo (spoon on left in both photos) and Bill's Salmo (spoon on right in both photos) showing that these spoon spoons are essentially the same. Both spoons are stamped as size 2. Why Burgess produced such similar spoons under two names is unknown, but based on names used in known-date tackle catalogs, the Combo name seems to have been used before Salmo. (Author's collection.)

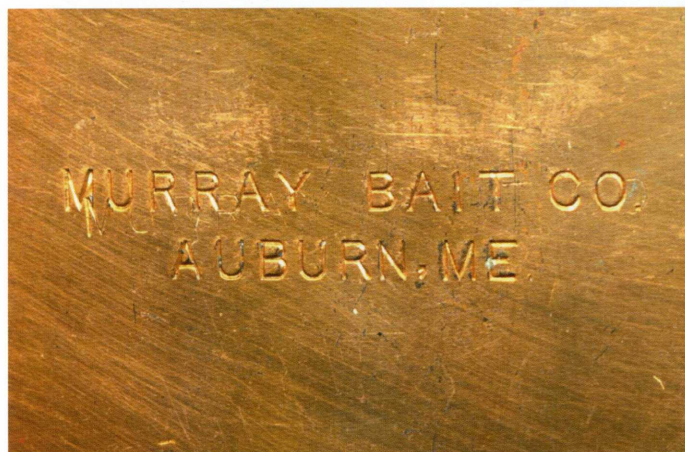


Fig. 16. The stamping on a Murray Trolling Spoon was deep and clear, but they are always small relative to the lure's size and thus can be easily over-looked. Sometimes the company's name appears on the top of the blade, other times lower down on the blade. Collectors must look closely when trying to identify a spoon made by Dick and John Murray (also see Fig. 15 below). (Author's collection.)



replaced on the commercial market by Burgess' State-O-Maine (Fig. 12).

Burgess' State-O-Maine spoon, like Morse's Lake Auburn spoon, is rounder and more concave than the Combo-Salmo trolling spoon. Similar to the Lake Auburn (Figs. 5 & 6), the State-O-Maine has a lead-lined underside and a twisted loop at the bottom of the shaft (Fig. 13). In contrast, Bill's Combo-Salmo has a simple bend at the end of the shaft and can be found both with and without a lead-coated underside (Fig. 14). Note that the blade of a Bill's Combo-Salmo has a more pointed top-end than either Burgess' State-O-Maine or Morse's Lake Auburn (Fig. 15). Burgess' trolling spoons are very lightly stamped and to be properly identified the blade's upper side must be closely examined.

Other post-Morse makers of trolling spoons in southern Maine, contemporaries of Bill Burgess, were the Murray brothers of Auburn. Richard William Murray (1897-1969) and John Lee Murray (1899-1963) started the Murray Bait Company circa 1935 and ceased doing business eight years later. J. Lee Murray established a second fishing tackle company with another partner around 1947. This company was in business for approximately two decades.

The Murray brothers made a copper trolling spoon that was similar in design and material to the Morse and Burgess trolling spoons. Murray's spoons, like their predecessors, were stamped (Fig. 16) and the undersides were generally coated with a thin layer of melted lead (Fig. 17). The Murray spoons I have examined range in length from 2 to 5 3/4 inches, and come with two types of shafts. The first shaft, which I believe to be their earlier version, was similar to Morse's original design in that it was made of a heavy-gauge brass wire with one metal bead fixed in place on the shaft for the blade to rotate against (Fig. 17, upper row of spoons). The second type of shaft used by the Murray brothers was made of a much smaller gauge wire covered with a row of glass beads (Fig. 17, bottom row of spoons). The Murray brothers were the last of the Maine lure makers to make a copper trolling spoon with a heavy-gauge brass shaft and metal beads.

After the Murrays, other Maine lure makers like J. Lee Murray Tackle Company, the Lee (a.k.a. Abenaki) Spinner Company, and H & J Fishing Tackle made their trolling spoons with shafts fashioned from light gauge wire, glass beads, and blades from a variety of metals other than copper. In the two types of trolling spoons produced by the Murrays, one sees the break from mirroring Morse's design to a new trolling spoon made from modern materials with modern methods.

Charles H. Morse established a legacy of lure making that others emulated long after his death. With soundness of design and materials, the trolling spoon initially designed and made by Morse lived on in similar spoons made by Burgess and the Murray brothers. Because of this continuity, the trolling spoons used mostly in Maine remained remarkably unchanged for approximately five decades. However, the availability of different materials (i.e., thinner metal shafts and blades), and the development of new technologies (i.e.,

hand presses vs. machine presses to shape metal), led Dick and John Murray to develop a markedly new, lighter style of trolling spoons.

Charles Morse, Bill Burgess, and Dick and John Murray were people with ideas, skills, and strong work ethics who all thought highly enough of their work to boldly identify their metal products. So the next time you handle a trolling spoon, or any lure, with the maker's name stamped into it, think of the individual who created this piece. These were confident and proud people, so much so that they boldly stamped their work with their own names. Let those of us who collect this work decades after they were made always remember the individuals behind the stamping - a permanent mark made to ensure that the maker's lures would be recognized far into the future. 🐟

*I wish to thank those individuals for providing information and helping me to find the materials used in this article: Craig Brown, Dave Fuller, Joel Gushee, Ron Goddard, Jeff Knapp, Dan Leroux, Lloyd Lindholm, and Jim Murray. Special thanks to Ellen Krohn and Ron Goddard for reviewing this article. I also wish to acknowledge Ron's help in characterizing Morse's spoons, and for letting me examine and photograph his collection of early Maine trolling spoons.*



Fig. 17. Examples of the copper trolling spoons made by the Murray Bait Company showing upper sides (left photo) and bottom sides (right). The shafts of the upper spoons used heavy gauge brass wire similar to Morse's Lake Auburn and Burgess' two spoons discussed above. The lower two spoons, in contrast, are made of a lighter gauge wire and have plastic instead of porcelain or metal beads. These two trolling spoons were the first in Maine to show a marked progression away from what C. H. Morse had first designed approximately 50 years earlier. (Author's collection.)



## **Errata**

### ***Trolling Spoons and Baseball: The Life, Lures, and Legacy of Charles H. Morse (NFLCC Magazine, Summer 2014)***

#### **Page 4; end of First Paragraph on page 4 should read (omitted text in italics):**

*This listing does not state what kind of fishing lure was made by Morse, nor when he practiced his trade. Like many of the early fishing lure makers, Morse's life has largely faded into the past. Morse's life can be reconstructed, however, by studying birth and death records, city directories, period newspapers, tackle catalogs, U.S. Census records, and Web sites (including, in this case, baseball records).*

#### **Page 5, at bottom of page:**

"Fig. w3." should be "Fig. 3."

#### **Page 8, at end of the legend for Fig. 16:**

"(also see Fig. 15 below)." should be "(also see Fig. 17 below)."