
The Search for the Real Benjamin Yoe Morrison

William C. Miller III
Bethesda, MD

The story of Ben Morrison's life is like a puzzle. Unfortunately, unlike most puzzles, the individual pieces (the facts) neither are provided for you nor are readily available. Such is the nature and the challenge of historical research. One has to search for each part of the puzzle, testing each new discovery to see how (or even if) it fits with what is already known. Historical research, a cumulative process, is a time-consuming endeavor which is no less challenging than a good murder mystery. Every discovery draws one closer to the completed picture, but the thrill of discovery is tempered by the realization that now at least two additional directions need to be pursued. The sensation of progress might be best described as an exercise in one step forward and two steps back...or the more I learn, the more I realize that there is much more to learn. I am pleased to report, however, that the story of Ben Morrison's life has begun to take shape.

Very little has been written about Ben Morrison, and there are comparatively few people around today who knew him well, so it has been necessary to identify and locate other sources of information. The best book to date which deals with Ben Morrison's life is *Hybrids and Hybridizers* by Philip A. Livingston and Franklin H. West, Harrowood Books, Newtown Square, PA (1978). While the chapter on Morrison is unquestionably the best source of information of its kind, it is not without problems. Attributed to friends and colleagues, it stumbles mightily on a number of small but important details. For example, it consistently misspells his middle name (Yoe), his father's name (Lisle), and refers to Morrison's brother "George" when he did not have a brother by that name. Those specifics notwithstanding, the book is a must for every azalea enthusiast's personal library.

Over the last ten years, the search for the "real" Ben Morrison has led to: Takoma Park, Glenn Dale, and Beltsville, Maryland; the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, DC; River Farm in Virginia; Pensacola, Florida; Memphis, Tennessee; and Gulfport and Pass Christian, Mississippi. The many memoranda and letters that have been discovered in long-abandoned file cabinets and aged cardboard boxes have contributed much to our understanding of Ben Morrison. He was, after all, an extremely prolific writer, and many of his letters to friends, colleagues, and acquaintances have survived to yield valuable insight into his character, his attitudes, his philosophy, and his plant material. The Freedom of Information Act of 1966 (FOI), which makes it possible gain access to official government files, has proven to be an invaluable tool, as well.

Ben Morrison's life is divisible roughly into thirds — his early life, leading up to his parents settling in Takoma Park, Maryland; his professional life, involving his productive years in various capacities with the Department of Agriculture; and his retirement years in Pass Christian, Mississippi.

Ben Morrison's early life is still something of a mystery. When his parents bought the house in 1913 on what is now Piney Branch Road in Takoma Park, Maryland, he was 22 years old. How the Morrison family got to Takoma Park from Atlanta, where he was born on November 25, 1891, is not clear. Attempts to



Ben Morrison

track the family's movements have only been partially successful. We know that Ben's brother, Louis Keith, and his sister, Phoebe, were born in Washington, DC, in 1895 and Takoma Park in 1902 respectively, and that Ben graduated from Central High School in the District of Columbia in 1909. The oldest address that I have turned up for the Morrison family is 103 Oak Avenue, Takoma Park, DC. It was to this address that Ben's father had the legal paperwork sent when they bought the house on what is now Piney Branch Road (1913). Part of Takoma Park is in Maryland and part is in the District. If that is not confusing enough, many of the street names have changed. When Ben bought his parents' house on March 9, 1938, the address was 116 Chestnut Avenue. Today, that same property is 7320 Piney Branch Road.

Similarly, Oak Avenue at some point became Cedar Avenue.

Ben Morrison attended the University of California at Berkeley from 1909 to 1913 and received a B.S. in Agriculture (*cum laude*, *Phi Beta Kappa*). He studied Landscape Architecture at Harvard, received an M.L.A. in 1915, and studied Landscape in China and Japan under a Harvard Sheldon Fellowship from 1916 to 1917. He served in the U.S. Army during World War I as a private in the Medical Corps and later as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Sanitation Corps. Records indicate that duty stations included Allentown, Pennsylvania; Washington, DC; and New Haven, Connecticut.

Ben Morrison is probably best known for development of the 454 Glenn Dale hybrid azaleas, the five Belgian-Glenn Dale hybrid azaleas, and the 53+ Back Acres hybrid azaleas, the latter two groups being logical extensions of the Glenn Dale hybrid work that began in the privacy of his home in Takoma Park, Maryland, in the early 1920's. Azalea enthusiasts may even be aware of the major role he played in the creation of the U.S. National Arboretum and that he was its first director. But, that is probably where common knowledge ends, and most people are unaware that he was really a man of many remarkable talents and incredible energy. Besides being a first-class horticulturist and landscape architect, he was an artist of considerable talent, and many of his horticultural drawings, which reflect his keen powers of observation, are still around to be appreciated. He had a solo-grade voice, and at one point early on, he considered a music career in New York. Much later, in Pass Christian, Mississippi, where he retired, he was very active in the music program of the Pineville Presbyterian Church, the beautiful little church on Menge Avenue (about 0.4 mile beyond the Montebella Road turnoff to the Back Acres) to which he donated his piano and devoted much of his energy. He once confided to a

friend that when things got tough he could "go to the little church where I keep my piano (our house is too small and Anderson with whom I make my home would not enjoy the practice) and in an hour or so, live in a quite different world." Ben Morrison was a man of many talents and yet operating an automobile was not one of them. He never learned how to drive, a basic and essential skill that we take for granted today.

Curiously, depending on whom you talk to, Ben Morrison appears to have been two very different men. It is evident that he was not the sort of person about whom one was neutral. People either liked him or disliked him, but everyone respected him. Some likened him to a hard driving martinet with a fiery tongue and no patience, while others described him as a very caring individual with remarkable drive who was extremely generous with his time and resources. My review of much of his personal correspondence suggests that there is an element of truth to both camps. I suspect that he was not the sort of person that you wanted to disappoint when he was depending on you. He expected of others the same level of performance that he required of himself. My impression is that you wanted him with you and not against you, as he could be a formidable opponent. I particularly like David Leach's description of him in *Hybrids and Hybridizers*: "He was invariably courteous, even charming, to me; but I was a little afraid of him in the early days. His acid tongue, devastatingly witty observations, and corrosive letters were famous. They were the product of a quick brain with friction brakes that worked in reverse. Friction, especially of mindless origin, loosened the rolling tongue. Ben Morrison was the Terrible Tempered Mr. Bang in the memory of many a singed horticulturist."

Ben Morrison's official employment record makes interesting reading. In 1914, he held the title of "Agent" and was paid \$3.00 a day un-

der a temporary appointment in the Bureau of Plant Industry. As his career progressed, some of the titles he held were Cartographer, Landscape Gardener, Scientific Assistant in Landscape Gardening, Assistant Landscape Architect, Junior Horticulturist, Assistant Horticulturist, Associate Horticulturist, Senior Horticulturist, Principal Horticulturist in Charge, and finally Director of the National Arboretum. Over his career his "headquarters" (duty stations) included: Washington, DC; Glenn Dale, Maryland; Bogota, Colombia; and Beltsville, Maryland. In 1937, he was named Acting Director of the National Arboretum in addition to his regular duties. Few people realize that he was the second Acting Director, succeeding Dr. Frederick V. Coville; and that it was not until April of 1951, seven months before he retired, that he was named Director. One theory has it that the Arboretum's Advisory Council was reluctant to push for a full-time director because of the uncertainty that the Arboretum would survive. Despite that curious situation, no individual did more to make the National Arboretum possible than Ben Morrison. On two occasions, he resigned from government service, once in 1922 to attend music school in New York and once in 1923 because the work for which his reinstatement had been requested had been finished. He was reinstated again six months later. There was no evidence of any official reprimands or adverse actions in his official file. In fact, a final report on the completion of a probationary period in 1920 was quite complimentary: "What has been stated in the initial and intermediate reports relative to Mr. Morrison still holds good. He has excellent initiative; has a rather wide knowledge of plant material; is adaptive, conscientious, energetic, and is a valuable asset in our landscape gardening work." One of the major milestones in his career come on July 1, 1941, when he was reassigned to "full time" at the Arboretum. Finally, toward the end of his career, his record

is punctuated by a number of periods of "leave without pay" which, with no additional explanation, seem to have been for personal reasons.

One of Ben Morrison's significant long-term interests was the American Horticultural Society (AHS). His service as president and later as the principal editor of the society's magazine for 37 years would be enough, but it does not really tell the complete story. Many of the covers of the magazine were Morrison's own woodblock prints.

The extent to which he personally subsidized AHS is not widely known, but in 1943, he applied for a personal loan from the American Security and Trust Company in Washington, DC. In the statement of his personal expenses that was submitted in support of the loan application he wrote: "My personal expenses, which are of my own making, involve two monthly payments, one of \$50.00 to the American Horticultural Society as my contribution toward the work, and a sum which usually amounts to about \$40.00 for lessons in Spanish, a self-imposed subject which is of great use in my present office and present work." That monthly \$50 donation to AHS in today's standard is significant, but it takes on even more meaning when you realize that it constituted approximately ten percent of his gross income at the time. His feelings for AHS also show through his personal letters to some of his friends. It is evident that when he moved out of the Washington area, the distance diminished his ability to influence the decision making process within the AHS, and that troubled him. Incidentally, the purpose of the above-mentioned loan was to pay for a collection of herbarium sheets that he had arranged to obtain for the Arboretum. His superiors had cancelled the procurement after the herbarium sheets had been delivered, leaving him in a seriously compromised position. He chose to pay for the sheets

himself rather than to create a hardship for the person from whom he had obtained the collection. Ben Morrison donated the collection to the Arboretum.

It is my belief that in March of 1952, Ben Morrison moved to Pass Christian, Mississippi on the Gulf coast to live at the "Back Acres," the family home of Ivan Anderson. I am uncertain of the actual date because I have not found any references to the move in any of his letters, and there is much to suggest that the move was transitional over a number of years. He officially retired from the Arboretum on November 30, 1951, but he must have had difficulty in letting go, since he held the official title of "Consultant" for one year. His file shows a change of "headquarters" from Washington, DC, to Pass Christian, Mississippi, effective March 17, 1952, which suggests that he left the Washington area at about that time. At the Back Acres, Ben Morrison continued his azalea breeding activities and, with the help of Frank Dowdle, tried to make a go of the Pass Christian Nursery. The nursery struggled for five years and then failed. Located approximately 2.5 miles north of Pass Christian about 0.2 miles outside the city's corporate limit, the Back Acres provided him with the privacy and the opportunity to pursue his considerable horticultural interests. It is ironic that many of the people in Pass Christian never really knew that much about Ben Morrison's past. He apparently never told them. Pictures of the Anderson property, probably taken in the 1950's, reveal that it was an absolute horticultural showplace and that, very likely, did most of his talking for him. There are numerous references in his letters about having to prepare for visitors, so being off the beaten track did not translate to total privacy. Regrettably, since Morrison's death, the "Back Acres" has been stripped of almost all of its treasures, but that is another story.

On May 3, 1954, the U.S. National Arboretum honored Ben Morrison by naming the azalea clonal garden after him. The clonal garden had been one of Ben Morrison's projects. Dating back to the mid-1940's, it was designed to display a collection of the Glenn Dale hybrids and to serve as a prototype for the development of other "unit gardens." Transcripts of the dedication ceremony, including his remarks, are available, and it is clear that he was deeply moved by the honor.

I had imagined that Ben Morrison might have died while busily tending to his latest and most beautiful azaleas. There might not have been a more fitting way for a man like him to go, but such was not the case, as reported by his personal physician, Dr. C. D. Taylor, Jr. On the evening of Sunday, January 23, 1966, Morrison called his doctor and complained of what he described as a spasm in his neck and upper esophageal area. In the early morning of the next day, the pain became severe, and the doctor sent him to the emergency room and had him admitted to the Intensive Care Unit at Memorial Hospital in Gulfport. His condition deteriorated over the day, and at approximately 7:00 p.m. on January 24th, Ben Morrison succumbed to a massive myocardial infarction (heart attack). He was 74 years old.

Ben Morrison is buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Gulfport, Mississippi, in the Anderson plot. The plain stone, which marks his grave, is consistent with the way he lived his life, though it is poor testament to his many contributions and to the beauty that he created.

Bill Miller is Vice President of The Society, co-chairman of the Membership Committee and chairman of the Public Information Committee. He is a member of the Brookside Gardens Chapter and has served as chairman of Horticulture for the chapter's annual flower show for many years. He is a frequent contributor to THE AZALEAN. □