CHARLES H. MORSE (1868-1931):
Maker of Metal Trolling Spoons
Auburn, Maine

Author’s collection.

Charles H. Morse was born in 1868 on the day before Christmas in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

His parents were Charles A., and Lydia G., Morse. As a two-year old child, he lived with his parents and paternal grandparents in Stoneham, Massachusetts. Morse was educated in eastern Massachusetts. When 23 years, he started playing minor league baseball in Providence, Rhode Island. Later that year (i.e., 1891) he moved to the Twin Cities of Lewiston-Auburn, Maine. Here Morse played in the Lewiston team for part or all of three seasons (i.e., 1891, 1896, & 1901). In 1899, Morse played for the Rochester, New York team where a local newspaper declared “Morse comes pretty near to being the premier pitcher of this league.” Morse, a left-hander, pitched for approximately 10 teams between 1891 and 1904. In 14 seasons he played in 315 games, pitching in more than 1,500 innings during 11 seasons (3 seasons he played positions other than pitcher). According to his obituary, Morse “gained quite a reputation on the mound in Maine Fishing Lures by Wm. B. Krohn - 51
the Eastern league. He retired from baseball about 25 years ago (~1906) having last played on the Ilion team in the New York State League.” Apparently because he was usually the oldest player on his ball team, Morse’s nicknames included “Gramp,” “Gramps,” “Grandpa,” “Pa,” “Pop,” and Pops.”

When he first moved to Maine, Morse settled in Lewiston and through the years moved a number of times between the Twin Cities. Because baseball occupied only part of his year, Morse also worked in local shoe factories and probably started making his trolling spoon around the turn of the century. On 28 June 1902, Morse married Lena M. Johnson of Auburn. He was 33 years old at the time of his marriage, and Lena was 9 years his senior. The couple married in Morse’s hometown of Stoneham, Massachusetts, but they quickly returned to Maine where he continued to play baseball for another four or so years before retiring. Lena made shoes in Auburn factories from the time she was a teenager well into her adult life. The couple did not have any children.

What kind of person was Charles H. Morse? Surprisingly, I found 27 articles that mention Gramp(s) Morse in newspapers published in Lewiston, Maine. Twenty-five of the articles cover the period June 1901 through January 1923, when Morse was still living. Interestingly, only one article mentions Morse’s proper first name. While Charles H. Morse was generally known as “Pa” or “Pop” to the followers of minor league baseball, he was always Gramp(s) Morse to the people of the Twin Cities.

The content and number of the articles located demonstrate that Morse was well known.
and highly respected in his adopted towns of Auburn and Lewiston. Taken as a whole, these articles show a civic-minded man and a natural athlete who enjoyed a variety of team and outdoor sports. Morse not only played professional baseball, but he also organized local games for fun and to raise funds for civic causes, including Auburn’s Old Ladies Home. When Morse had his appendix removed in July 1901, the Auburn Policemen and the Pencil Pushers (local newspaper reporters) organized a baseball game with the gate proceeds going to help cover Morse’s hospital expenses. Once back up and on his feet, “Gramps” was invited to umpire the game because in previous benefit games his officiating “gave entire satisfaction on both sides.”

A year after his surgery, Morse had another close call. As reported in the *Lewiston Daily Sun* on 1 August 1902:

Lewiston and Auburn friends of “Gramp” Morse who was injured recently in New York State with a line of baseball players while crossing a railroad track in a team [another report stated that he was injured while “riding in a barge”], were pleased to know that he was not killed in the accident. “Gramp” has met many unfortunate occurrences during his career as a baseball player. He has been bit by a mad dog, had an attack of appendicitis, been operated upon and met with other minor unfortunate happenings. It is hoped by a large circle of his admirers that his injuries will not prove fatal and it is expected that unless those sustained by him were of a most serious nature that he will be on the diamond in a few days with the little round baseball in his hand ready as ever to show the “boys” how to twirl them.

Morse soon recovered and settled with the railroad company for his injuries and time lost from playing ball.

Charles Morse was a dog lover and in December 1902, as part of the annual City Hall Poultry Show in Lewiston, organized a show of hunting dogs. The show was a great success, with

*Maine Fishing Lures* by Wm. B. Krohn - 53
Morse publically proclaiming he would make it even bigger and better the next year. In the fall, Morse hunted ruffed grouse and woodcock with pointing dogs, and in winter used hounds to pursue snowshoe rabbits and red foxes in the forests and fields north of Auburn. Morse also enjoyed ice skating during the winter, perhaps seeing this as a way to stay in shape for the baseball. In an article printed in the *Lewiston Daily Sun* on 11 January 1923, the author wrote:

“Gramps” reputation as a skater is well known about town but he made the eyes of the youngsters stick out yesterday when he did fancy stunts for their benefit. He cut all kinds of didoes [pranks] and scratched his name the ice. The rink is crowded long in the evening when the lights are in use.

Slightly more than half of the news articles found were about Morse’s baseball activities – noting what team he had signed with, when he left town for the season, and comments about his victories and defeats. At a July 4th game played in 1901 with 1,500 fans in attendance, the Auburn team soundly defeated the Lewistons. Morse was the pitcher for the winning team and the *Lewiston Daily Sun* declared that “It was one of the greatest exhibitions of pitching that a Lewiston crowd has had the pleasure of witnessing in years.” But if Morse’s team lost, the newspapers just as readily would proclaim that “‘Gramp’ Morse proved to be no enigma for Portland today. The famed left-handed twirler was bumped good and hard from start to finish.”

Of all the sporting activities Morse excelled at, the one which he was consistently held in high regards for was fishing, especially trolling for landlocked salmon on Lake Auburn shortly after ice-out. In May 1905 one newspaper declared: “‘Gramp’ Morse carried off the honors at Lake Auburn yesterday, his catch being four salmon weighing 9 ½, 4 ½, 3 ½, and 2 pounds. This is a *Maine Fishing Lures* by Wm. B. Krohn - 54
record breaker for the season.” On May 21 the following year, the *Lewiston Daily Sun* noted that “Owing to the prevailing high wind Saturday and Sunday, few fishermen ventured on Lake Auburn. The waves were running as high as barrels, making boating dangerous to anyone who did not understand how to row.” Apparently, Morse knew how to row in high waves for on Saturday he caught the largest salmon of the day, tipping the scale at 6½ pounds. On Sunday, he landed a 4½ pound landlocked salmon.

From 1914 through 1925, the *Androscoggin County Directories* shows Charles and Lena Morse renting on Pleasant and Hampshire streets in Auburn. Around 1922, the Morses bought a house at 52 Hampshire Street in Auburn. Charles H. Morse is last listed in the *Androscoggin Directory* of 1926, and apparently ceased making the Lake Auburn Trolling Spoon sometime in 1927 (see Gallery below). In 1928, Morse was admitted to the State Mental Hospital on Arsenal Street in Augusta, Maine where he died on August 31, 1931. According to Morse’s death record, he died from a “General paralysis of the insane.” Charles H. Morse, age 62, was buried in North Auburn Cemetery, less than a mile north of the inlet to his beloved Lake Auburn. Lena retired from shoe making and shortly before her husband’s death, and roomed at the Marcotte Home, a facility for the elderly ran by the Catholic Church in Lewiston. She died in 1938.

Thirteen years after Morse’s death, an article published in the *Lewiston Daily Sun* on 12 December 1944 recalled times past when Auburn’s citizens skated on the frozen surfaces of the Androscoggin River and Lake Auburn. The reminiscence included:

Scores [of ice skaters] paused in their day’s sport to watch the gyrations of ‘Gramp’ Morse of Auburn. Compared to the average or good skater, ‘Gramp’ was an artist.
Perhaps he didn’t know the whole routine, but he could cut enough figures to hold spectators spell-bound.

‘Gramp’ Morse probably had a first name, but nobody ever used it. He was not only a fine figure skater, but a hunter and fisherman, a mighty good pocket billiards player, and before that was a baseball player of more than local reputation.

‘Gramp’ and his cronies are gone and nobody has appeared to take his place.

While Charles H. Morse has passed, and only a few published memories of the man remain, his legacy lives on in that his metal lures strongly influenced Maine’s other early makers of trolling spoons. Documentation of this influence, along with detailed descriptions and photographs of Morse’s trolling spoons, can be found in Krohn (2014).

**References**


Krohn, W. B. 2014. Trolling spoons and baseball: the life, lures, and legacy of Charles H. Morse. *The National Fishing Lure Collectors Club Magazine*, 24 (1): 4-9 (Summer Issue). [In addition to documenting Morse’s baits, the article assesses the Morse’s effect on the trolling spoons made after his death by Bill Burgess and the Murray brothers; includes numerous color illustrations.] [An editor’s correction for the first paragraph of this piece was published on page 3 of the 2014 Winter Issue of the *NFLCC Magazine*].

H. A. Manning Company. Compiler and publisher. *Manning’s Lewiston and Auburn Directory*. [Issues from 1930 through 1939 were searched, but not every year was available.].

*Maine Fishing Lures* by Wm. B. Krohn - 56
Merrill & Webber Company. Compiler and publisher. *Resident and Business Directory of Androscoggin County, Maine*. [Issues from 1902-03 through 1928 were searched, but not every year was available.].

Turner, A. R. *Turner’s Androscoggin County Directory*. A. R. Turner, Auburn, Maine. [Issues of 1896-97 and 1898-99 were searched.].

*Maine Fishing Lures* by Wm. B. Krohn - 57
A post card advertising the guiding services of Charles H. Morse, shown here holding a large, male landlocked salmon. This post card, circa 1910, was made a four or so years after Morse retired from minor league baseball, and shortly before he and Lena, his wife, moved from Lewiston to Auburn, Maine. In addition to guiding during this period, Morse was making and selling his trolling spoons.
Above are examples of Morse’s Lake Auburn Trolling Spoon: an unstamped spoon (left), a spoon only stamped on the top of the blade (middle), and a spoon stamped on both the top and bottom of the blade (right). The brass shafts of a Morse spoon are relatively thick, long, and bent in one of two ways as shown below, with the circle at the bottom end on the shaft (spoon on the right below) being more characteristic of a Morse spoon. The middle spoon is 4 inches long.
The underside of Morse’s spoons, as shown above, are coated in melted lead. Morse’s early Lake Auburn spoons had a porcelain bead above a metal bead that was soldered to the shaft (left and middle spoons), whereas his later spoons used two metal beads, again with the lower bead soldered to the shaft (right spoon).

The lure’s size, if present, is stamped either at the top of the spoon along with Morse’s name or lower on the blade in the “LAKE AUBURN” as shown above. The higher the number the smaller the spoon (see next illustration).
A series of Morse’s Lake Auburn Trolling Spoons, with cooper spoons on the top row and brass on the bottom. The sizes of the individual spoons are as follows (left to right): top – 1, 02, 3, 4, and 6; bottom – 04 and 7. All of the above cooper spoons have lead-coated undersides whereas the spoons on the bottom row are brass on both sides. The spoon on the top row, far left is 4 1/4 inches long.
Two rare and unusually shaped Lake Auburn Trolling Spoons. By tapering the blade in the above form, it has the general form of a forage fish. Note the bent, long clip at the lower end of the shaft and the porcelain/metal bead combination at the shaft’s top; both features are characteristic of Morse’s work. These fish-shaped spoons are 3 inches in length.

An elongated Lake Auburn Trolling Spoon (left) and a double-bladed spinner (upper blade is copper, lower blade is brass) believed to have been made by C. H. Morse. Only one example of these two lures are known, and thus this attribution to Morse is tentative.
According to a chart published on page 54 of the T. B. Davis Tackle Catalog No. 45, circa 1927, the Lake Auburn Spoon was made in 6 sizes. However, I have seen Morse spoons ranging from size 1 (the largest) to 9 (the smallest). Morse used the same numbering system on both his copper and brass spoons.

Whereas the uppermost chart from the Davis catalog suggests that Morse’s Lake Auburn Spoons were available in 1927, the above chart from page 15 of the 1927 Wholesale Price List to T. B. Davis’ Fishing Tackle Catalog No. 45 suggests otherwise. Note also that the sizes shown in both chart do not match. That is, a Size 2 in the upper chart is 4 inches long whereas in the lower chart a Size 2 is only 2 inches long. Furthermore, Morse did not make the State-O-Maine Spoon; this was a Bill Burgess product (see page 62). Apparently, Morse stopped providing T. B. Davis with Lake Auburn Spoons sometime after the Catalog No. 45 went to press but before the Price List for Catalog 45 was printed in 1927.
“Pop” Morse in his Rochester (New York) Typewriter’s baseball uniform, 1899. While a top minor league pitcher, Morse never moved up into the major league, possibly because he was older than the typical player and thus may have been thought to have had only a few years of peak performance remaining. To supplement his income, Morse made and sold a high quality trolling spoon, using copper, lead, and brass. According to his death record, he suffered from mental sickness for more than three years before his death. Thus, it’s likely that Morse ceased making his Lake Auburn Trolling Spoon sometime in 1927. Sadly, one has to wonder the degree to which fumes from melted cooper and lead may have contributed to Morse’s sickness and death.

*Maine Fishing Lures* by Wm. B. Krohn - 64