

THE FIRST GUNSMITH IN MONTANA

“Montana leads nation in gun companies per capita” was a recent headline in the Montana newspapers.

The person who made the first gun in Montana has a name very familiar to Seeley Lakers – Charles T. Morrell.

CT was the youngest of a large family. His father, Richard, was killed in the battle of Antietam in the Civil War.

Charles was one of the youngest of 5 children, grew up in New York State. His sister, Nan (Ketchum), moved from New York to Helena married to a builder. She wrote to her brother telling him it would be a fine place for him to start a business. He then traveled to Montana in 1889, just before it became a state. He had loved guns all his life, was a gunsmith and had learned all about safes, locks and furniture making. In Helena he had a shop that sold guns, outdoor equipment, etc. There, he manufactured the first gun made in Montana.

In 1894 he moved out into the unsettled area northwest of Helena now known as Seely Lake where he bought land from James Culbertson near the mouth of the creek that bears Morrell's name. A mountain peak, lake and falls are also named for him. Charles and Laura later each filed homesteads about a mile east of today's Seeley Lake airport (1907). Charles also filed a homestead near Woodworth (1909). Earlier, Charles had filed a homestead just east of today's Bonner (1900).

Charles homesteaded the area until 1910 when his wife Laura (Cunningham) died and he decided to return to Helena. He remarried in 1912. Morrell sold his land holdings to the Corlett family and this property eventually became part of the Double Arrow Ranch.

GLO maps of the time show today's Seeley Lake as Clearwater Lake. The Jocko Indian Trail coming from Placid Creek is about on the route of today's Tupper Lake Road. The Summit Indian trail heads northward along Two Fork Creek (now Morrell Creek.) The old location of the Missoula/Deer Lodge (now Powell) County line extended south from the current Seeley Swan High School, crossed the Old Wagon Road (now Hwy 83) about at the museum, a mile up Owl Creek proceeding south west of Salmon Lake.