

IT AINT MY FAULT!

by Jim Morriss - 2001

In the summer of 1960, I was getting ready to start college. One of the big decisions that had to be made by kids, who wanted an engineering degree, as I did, was what slide rule to buy. Getting a good slide rule was not an option. You absolutely had to have one, and if you expected to graduate you had to know how to use it. I remember picking out a Deitzgen Deci-Trig Microglide unit which cost me 26 bucks. That was a lot of money in those days. My slide rule came with a simulated leather case which looked like the sheath for a dagger and gave this delicate instrument the protection it deserved. If I really wanted to make a fashion statement, I could even wear the case on my belt for all the world to see. It was customary for aspiring engineers, who took a lot of pride in the ownership of their slide rules; to have their names emblazoned on them. There was a perfect place on the flap of my black simulated leather slide rule sheath for a name. I found a shop in down town Tampa that specialized in labeling luggage, bowling and golf trophies and all kinds of odd ball items. For just 25 cents per letter the guy in the shop could stamp my name, or anything else that I wanted, on my slide rule case in genuine gold leaf letters. I gave him my slide rule case and carefully printed my name on the paper that he gave me. I explained that my last name had two "R's" and two "S's" in it, and to spell "JIM MORRISS" would require ten letters. Then I gave him \$2.58 in advance, to cover the cost of the job plus the 3% sales tax that the State of Florida charged at that time. He gave me a receipt and told me to return in 24 hours. The next day when I picked up the case, it looked great. The gold letters on the black case had a classy elegance that were sure to give much more importance to the numbers that I would soon be crunching. The problem was that they spelled my name with just one "S." The shop owner actually argued with me that I had spelled my name wrong on the ticket that I filled out and that he was just fixing my mistake. I hit him back with "I guess I know how to spell my own name" and "Why did you charge me for ten

letters if you were only going to use nine?" He finally gave in and stamped another "S" on the case, but he did not seem very happy about my dogmatic persistence.

That episode was just one of an endless list of incidents that my family has encountered in our attempt to spell our last name the way we were taught to. I don't think my family members have ever been particularly picky about the spelling of the name. We don't take offense or get upset if someone drops the second "S." But our clan has resisted the continuing pressure to simplify the spelling of our name and I have always wondered why. Why do we spell it the way that we do, and why do we occasionally run into individuals who insist we are doing it incorrectly? Some of my very first memories are of my grandmother trying to teach me to print letters on a piece of paper rather than the random scribbling that small children like to do. She very patiently showed me how to hold the crayon and to spell out "M O R R I S S." By the time I got to kindergarten, it was automatic. From then on, when any one questioned the spelling of my last name, I just told them, "it's got two S's." On those rare times when that was not satisfactory, I learned to say, "It is not my fault, that's the way I was taught to spell it." I know that we will probably never find out how we happened to get our name. It is also doubtful that we will ever know who first chose the spelling that we use, but we have just as much reason to spell it the way we do as anyone has to spell it differently.

The idea that every family must have a name is not really very old. It seems to have started less than a thousand years ago and by 1500 A.D. (at least in the various European cultures) it was expected that most people would have two or more names, one to identify the family and the other to classify the individual. Family names were often adopted that denoted a place of origin or the occupation of an ancestor. Somehow by the time we started to populate the

Western Hemisphere, everyone seemed to have a family name, and those who didn't just selected one. For example, If your name was Smith, someone back there probably was an iron pounder. The name of Cooper meant that somebody was a barrel maker. Family names like Johnson or Williamson obviously said that someone was once proud to be called the son of John or of William. Prefixes "Mac" and "Fitz" have similar uses in Scotch and Irish family names. Exact spelling didn't matter very much because almost no one could write. Still, the derivations of many of the names that we can now find in a telephone directory are not so understandable.

My family has always claimed to be partly Welsh and I have heard that the name Morriss comes from Wales. There does not seem to be an abundance of information available on the language and history of the part of the UK that is now known as Wales. But with just a little persistence, some facts can be dug out of the Internet. It seems that for several hundred years the honchos who ran England tried to suppress the teaching of the Welsh language. This was partly because they sincerely felt that only proper tongues such as Latin, French or perhaps English should be spoken on their island. It was also partly because the Welsh had an audacious nature with a culture and history that rivaled their Norman rulers. The English still like to use the derogatory term chieftain to describe the medieval rulers of Wales. But some of the old Welsh leaders had every bit as much reason to be considered "Royalty" as the various misfits who were sitting on the English throne of that time. Around 1000 A.D. one of the old time Welsh leaders was called "Rhys." He must have been well thought of by the people he led, and he must have had a pretty good batting average in the continuous battles that his people were fighting. Rhys must have also been quite prolific, because many younger Welshmen began to name their babies "Rhys."

In that part of the world the term "ap" had a meaning of "from the house of." There was a king named Gruffydd who had four sons who he

named Anarawd, Cadell, Maredudd and Rhys. The youngest son took over control of the kingdom (called Deheubarth) in 1155 and he ruled it for over forty years! He was called Rhys ap Gruffydd and must have been a really good military leader. His successes in battle even forced the English King Henry II to accept this particular Rhys as one of his barons. This did not bode well for the English Monarchy because a few years later some of Rhys' descendants were among the barons who shoved the Magna Carta in the face of Henry's son, King John.

The influence of Rhys ap Gruffydd, or Lord Rhys as he was also known, lived well past his reign. Many of his descendants chose to use variations of his name as their own. When family names began evolving a group of Welshmen who used the term "ap Rhys," became known as Pryce and this was sometimes spelled Price. Other clans who identified with Rhys became known as Reese and also Rice. The word Mawr in Welsh means great or grand. I understand that around 1200 AD, a group of people in Wales were using the term Mawr-Rhys for family identification. It may be simple speculation, but there is a very believable rumor that the names Morys, Morriss, Morris, Maurice, Morrison and several other variations all derive from this family. This all came about at a time when spelling in the English language was, to say the least, highly irregular.

By the time of our Revolutionary War, the name Morriss, with various spellings, was in use both in England and America. My own family who have persistently spelled the name with both "S's" can be traced back to this period. Without a doubt, the reason for one family to so persistently chose to identify themselves differently from others with the same name is because some one back there wanted to stay separate. The motivation for such a desire is not certain but the only possible reasons that make any sense today are politics and religion.

The Morriss family from which I descend, came from Virginia, were stalwart Presbyterians and sided for independence from England. The

spelling of our name may easily have been an emphatic statement that we were NOT like a set of Morris's who differed from these political or religious beliefs.

The earliest known member of my family was a man named William Morriss. Very little is known about William, but his son John P. Morriss left quite a few tangible records of his life. John was born in Virginia in 1787 and he was able to write quite well. An exact copy still exists of a document that John signed in 1842. It is not known whether John learned to write in a schoolroom or was educated at home. It is known that he adhered to the writing style of the eighteenth century, as did John's children.

At that time writing implements were limited. Pencils were very rare and most writing was done with dip pens and ink. Letters were affixed to paper in a cursive style that suited the available writing tools. Some of the letters written then looked different from the ABC's that we learned. In the 17 and 18 hundreds letters like "Q" and "P" were written differently than they are now. The letter "S" often looked quite a lot like an "F." and a double "S" usually looked like "FS."

Examples of this are prevalent in many old documents. In 1620 when William Bradford

wrote the Mayflower Compact, he said, "We promise all due submiffion and obedience---." In 1776 when Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence he stated, "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary ---." In the first decade of the 19th century Meriwether Lewis and William Clark wrote in their journals the words, "Mifsissippi" and "Mifsouri" rather than using the double "S's" that we are familiar with. Now the spellings of those words with two "S's" were the same as they are today. It was customary then to make the first "S" look like an "F." I have no idea why, that's just the way it was done. That was also the way that John P. Morriss, my great great grandfather, wrote his last name. His signature clearly shows that he intended it to be spelled with two "R's" and two "S's." There is absolutely no doubt about that.



The fact that my family has been following his lead for at least seven generations is not necessarily a bad thing, and it is not very likely that we will change. Should anyone still think that we are not spelling it right, let me emphatically say; "Don't blame me. Take your complaint to my great great great grandpaw!"

It's been nearly 41 years since I bought my slide rule. I used it frequently during five years of college and the first several years of my engineering career. It was rendered obsolete by the availability of cheap electronic calculators and personal computers. The lettering on the flap of the sheath is still visible and shows the corrected spelling of my name.

