



Celebrating heritage

By **Mary Wade Burnside**
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— French Morgan took a red-eye flight from his home in San Luis Obispo, Calif., on Thursday night with his brother, Kelly, landed in Baltimore on Friday morning, and drove to the Descendants of Col. Morgan Morgan Reunion at Pricketts Fort via the scenic route.

For them, that meant stopping off at Bunker Hill in the Eastern Panhandle, former home of Morgan, considered by many to be the first white settler in West Virginia in the 1730s, before checking into — where else? — the Clarion Hotel Morgan in Morgantown and heading to the Fairmont area for reunion activities Friday and Saturday.

“We’re the only Morgans of this clan in California,” said Kelly Morgan, who coincidentally lives in a town called Morgan Hill, Calif.

And although the brothers were born and raised in the Golden State, they have been aware of their ties to West Virginia through their ancestor and his son, David Morgan, who settled near Rivesville, because of a book they got from their aunt called “Report of the Col. Morgan Morgan Monument Commission” by Haze Morgan.

French Morgan — who shares the name not only with his father, but also with another prominent Morgan ancestor from a different branch of the family — has been more interested in the genealogy than his brother and even brought his son for a tour of the area two years ago. Kelly Morgan once lived in Charlottesville, Va., but never had visited West Virginia before.

On one fairly recent day, French Morgan idly Googled “Col. Morgan Morgan” and learned about the 100th Morgan reunion, which was celebrated Saturday with about 550 descendants at Pricketts Fort.

Usually, said Rita Laishley of Morgantown, the secretary/treasurer of the reunion committee, about 50 people attend the annual event. But with the 100th anniversary approaching, the committee decided to go all out and try to attract 100 people, one for each year the reunion has been held.

Instead, she took reservations for 570 Morgan descendants from 27 states and two countries — Canada and Belgium — and estimates, via a count of catered dinners, that about 540 of them actually showed up.

She attributes the success of the reunion to a number of factors, including the festivities being held at Pricketts Fort and the subsequent plaque that will be made featuring each attendee’s name and displayed at the fort.

“And then they started hearing how big it was going to be, and they wanted to be a part of that,” Laishley said.

A growing interest in genealogy also influenced some attendees. Bob Leonard, a cowboy-hat wearing rancher from Pawhuska, Okla., learned of his family’s heritage from a Texas cousin who works in the genealogy department of a public library.

He is a direct descendant of Zackquill Morgan, the colonel’s son and the founder of Morgantown, and decided that the 1,100-mile car trip to West Virginia would be worth meeting some next of kin. He found the reunion to be very informative in learning more of his family history.

“I’ve learned a lot of specifics that filled in the gaps,” he said.

And on the hot day that prompted a couple of people to not feel their best, Leonard was reveling in cooler weather than the 102- and 103-degree temperatures he had been experiencing back home.

“The climate is the biggest difference, the clean mountain atmosphere,” he said. “This is wonderful weather here.”

Activities began Saturday morning with a general assembly, a group photograph and a walk to the Pricketts

Fort Cemetery, where Zackquill Morgan has been laid to rest.

After lunch, an auction of West Virginia and Morgan-related items proved successful, with one out-of-print book called “A History and Genealogy of the family of Col. Morgan Morgan, the first white settler of the State of West Virginia” — written by the other, non-Californian French Morgan — fetching \$3,100.

“It gives an extensive genealogy of the family,” Laishley said. “People would give their eyeteeth for it.”

The history of the family is interesting and goes beyond just Morgan Morgan, who himself created the militia that became the West Virginia National Guard. His son, Zackquill, founded Morgantown, and his son David, who settled in Rivesville, was known as an Indian negotiator after rescuing his two children from members of the Delaware tribe.

David also was friends with Daniel Boone, whose mother was a Morgan, said Raymond Morgan of Fairmont, president of the reunion committee.

“He’s gone down in history with the false idea that he was an Indian fighter, but he was a negotiator,” said Raymond Morgan. “He was a peaceful man, but one you wouldn’t want to cross.”

That’s because, in order to negotiate with Indians in the wake of the kidnapping of white settlers, Raymond Morgan said, David actually then would take some Indian braves and use them as bargaining chips.

Lexie Sue Morgan, almost 10, of Meriden, Conn., has heard the David Morgan as an Indian negotiator stories from her father, who was born in North Central West Virginia but moved to Connecticut at the age of 2.

On Saturday, she was enjoying her first trip to West Virginia after listening to Morgan lore all of her life.

“It tells a lot about my family,” she said. “It’s good to meet other people in your family. Then you have more friends and more variety of people that you know.”

Other famous Morgan descendants include Francis Harrison Pierpont, considered the father of West Virginia and a former Virginia governor. And Kelly Morgan believes Julia Morgan, architect of Hearst Castle in San Simeon, Calif., may be a descendant, but not well-known financier J.P. Morgan — although the “P” in his name stands for “Pierpont.”

After 11 buses of Morgan descendants left Pricketts Fort on Saturday afternoon to tour the Sugar Lane area below Rivesville where David Morgan lived, the California Morgan brothers headed to their rental car and planned to nap at their hotel before heading back to Baltimore and catching an early morning flight home.

“It was a lot of effort to get here, but it was well worth it,” Kelly Morgan said.

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Photos



Bob Leonard, a rancher from Pawhuska, Okla., and a descendant of Morgantown founder Zackquill Morgan, checks out a family tree of Col. Morgan Morgan at the Descendants of Col. Morgan Morgan 100th Reunion, held Saturday at Pricketts Fort. Times West Virginian