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Amos and Lillian Rowe Frye and the Fryemont Inn

Don Casada November 2, 2022



Fryemont Inn, around 1923, from Kelly Bennett Collection, [Hunter Library Special Collections](#)
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Amos Monroe Frye, a native of Iredell County, was listed in the household of his parents, Jonathan and Rachel Fry, as a student of law in the 1880 census. Law studies completed, he arrived in Charleston, Swain County prior to July 29, 1883, the date that church records indicate that he was baptized and joined the Bryson City Presbyterian Church. He practiced law and generally immersed himself in community and church life. He became an elder in the [Presbyterian Church](#) before Charleston was renamed to Bryson City in honor of T.D. Bryson, who donated the land for the church and was himself a founding member. As noted by fellow attorney Stanley Black and recorded in the [U.S. Geographical Survey Decision Card](#) for Fry Mountain, prior to his marriage, Amos consistently spelled his name without the “e” appendage. This is validated by early records of the Bryson City Presbyterian Church, when as Clerk of the Session, he consistently signed his name as “A.M. Fry” in church business matters.

Fry married [Lillian Rowe](#), also of Iredell County, on February 5, 1895. She was a 22-year old daughter of Methodist minister Rev. Joseph C. and Nancy Brown Rowe; Amos was 42. Amos served one term in the State Senate; during that time, Lillian attended law school at UNC. In September, 1911, she obtained her license to practice law; she was the second woman licensed to do so in the state and the first to have passed a written bar examination.

On January 1, 1913, Citizens Bank was incorporated with Fry (still without the “e”) as its President. While the bank building wasn’t particularly large, its large columns lend it an aura of

significance. The bank was located directly across Everett Street from the building where Fry practiced law. He served as President throughout the bank's life, which, like many others, ended in default during the Great Depression. The couple later owned the [Fryemont Theater, located adjacent to Citizens Bank](#).

In 1923, the Fries built Fryemont Inn on the south side of Bryson City in anticipation of tourism. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which wouldn't be authorized by Congress for another three years, obviously played no role in their thinking. Rather, their focus was on access by highways and the general attractions of the mountain region. In an article printed in the Asheville Citizen on June 3, 1923, "Captain Frye" was cited to have observed:

"When the highway construction program is completed, Fryemont Inn will be at the junction of three great arteries of travel, one being the Old Hickory Highway leading from Asheville to Atlanta by way of Murphy; another by way of Franklin, and a proposed route leading to Knoxville, Tennessee."

The Appalachian Scenic Highway

The Asheville to Atlanta route mentioned by Amos Frye was part of the [Appalachian Scenic Highway](#) (ASH). ASH was largely the brainchild of the ASH Association's President, [Roscoe Marvel, who managed the Kenilworth Inn in Asheville](#). The Association did a tremendous job of promoting the ASH, far exceeding that of the organizers of the movement to promote the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) later in the same decade. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of newspaper and magazine articles published from Florida and Louisiana, the southern ends of the ASH, to Quebec at its northern termination, extolled the merits of the ASH, leveraging America's newfound love for the road and personal freedom associated with travel by automobile.

The onset of the Great Depression essentially spelled the end of the ASH promotion, but it was unquestionably successful venture in that it contributed vital support to the development of good roads in the mountain region of Western North Carolina. Another ASH leader, also from Asheville, was James Gudger Stikeleather, whose decade-long role as Commissioner on the NC Highway Commission was essential to development of good roads in the mountains. Dozens of photographs taken by [Kelly Bennett](#) of area road construction in the late 1920s and on into the 1940s bear witness to the fact that road construction was seen as a matter of vital community interest.

No indications have been found that the supporters of the ASH used Congressional or State Legislature authorizations for the establishment of the GSMNP in their own promotions, although both took place during the ASH's zenith. In fact, in the Swain County area, far more promotional attention was given to the Nantahala Gorge through which ran the newly macadamized road NC10 – the forerunner of today's US74 – than the Smokies. On the other hand, there is little doubt that the ASH efforts influenced the thinking of Park boosters, who were, after all, principally driven by the same motivations as the ASH Association – development of the business of tourism.

Commercial lodgings had operated in town since before the town of Charleston was renamed Bryson City in honor of Thaddeus Dillard Bryson in 1889, including the Mendenhall Hotel (later the Cooper House), the [Entella Hotel](#) and Robison Hotel (later the Galbreath House and later yet, the

Westdale Hotel). These establishments focused on a combination of long-term rentals and/or business traveler lodging; that was still the case for the Calhoun House in the 1960s. While in its early years, the Fryemont Inn did provide boarding for long-term renters, such as teachers at Bryson City High School, located across Cripple Creek on the hill west of the Inn, from its inception until today, it has catered primarily to tourists.

The two oldest operating businesses of any sort in Bryson City are Calhoun House Inn and Suites (1920) and Fryemont Inn (1923). Ironically, from Calhoun House Inn and Suites, there is a view of Fry Mountain, but it can't be seen from the Fryemont Inn (1923). However, from near the Inn – and the Inn itself when leaves are down – there is a wonderful view across Bryson City to the Smokies – as was seen [in this photo](#) taken by [Kelly Bennett](#) shortly after the Inn was first built. Tourism is the overwhelmingly dominant source of income to Swain County today – unhealthily so for the county and beyond. The attractions of the GSMNP are a factor, but certainly nothing approaching the dominance that the Park Service likes to promote in its claims regarding the millions of dollars in business that the GSMNP brings to surrounding counties. Ready access to the mountain area and the broad array of draws the other tourist attractions and the mountains themselves hold, are the key to tourism – keys which Amos and Lillian Rowe Frye presciently foresaw a century ago.

Amos Frye died in 1935 at the age of 82 and is [buried in the Bryson City Cemetery](#) alongside two infant children of the couple whose grave markers have their last names spelled Fry. Lillian died in 1957, age 84; her remains were cremated. The couple had one daughter who lived to adulthood, [Eugenia Lois Frye](#) (1901-1965). Lois married John Randolph; they had no children. The Fryemont Inn and the Frye-Randolph House are on the [National Register of Historic Places](#).