

Emma Willson





General Lester Willson with his wife Emma Weeks Willson and their sons Fred Willson (polka dot shirt) and Eugene Willson. The woman on the right is unknown.



not yet reached the town during his midsummer visit, forcing him to forgo sweetening his coffee with sugar.<sup>41</sup>

Lester reentered territorial politics.<sup>42</sup> The 1868 legislative election would be held in September, and the general, with his well-known connection to the Union Party's national committee, was drawn into the contest for Gallatin County representative to the territorial legislature. Sheepishly he sent a copy of the election ticket to Emma. In a brief letter scribbled on the back, he wrote:

You are surprised to see this election ticket as I said I would have nothing to do with politics and without my knowledge this was gotten up; printed in the papers, etc., and I could do no better than to submit with good grace, though there is no prospect of my being elected—or at events little prospect—as there are too many Rebels here.<sup>43</sup>

Lester's opponent was J. H. D. Street, a Southern-born attorney who had gained the Democratic nomination for Gallatin County's representative. His pessimism notwithstanding, Lester began to win over some of his "rebel" neighbors. His quiet humor and reputation for being an honest and industrious shopkeeper eventually attracted local Southerners willing to overlook his Union League activities. That September Lester won the election by only fourteen votes. "I must admit that there was a satisfaction in beating my opponent," he confided to Mary Cory,

41. Daniel S. Tuttle, "Early History of the Episcopal Church in Montana," *Contributions to the Historical Society*, 10 vols. (Helena, Mont., 1904), 5:313-14; Daniel S. Tuttle, *Reminiscences of a Missionary Bishop* (New York, 1906), 195.

42. Once returned to Bozeman, Lester resumed sending letters to the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, but the only response the paper printed was a terse "Montana has gone Democratic" on August 11, 1868.

### Union Ticket.

GALLATIN COUNTY.



For Councillman—4th District,  
J. J. HULL.

For Assembly—9th District,  
GEN. LESTER S. WILLSON,  
PHILIP THORPE.  
Commissioners,  
L. STOCKMAN,  
GEORGE AUSTIN.

Assessor,  
MARCELLUS PENWELL.

*Profrate Judge*  
*L. B. Luffman*  
*(copy)*

Although he vowed to have nothing to do with Montana politics, Lester Willson ran for Gallatin County representative to the territorial legislature in 1868, narrowly defeating his opponent. On the back of this Union Party ticket, he jotted a note to his fiancé, admitting he was a candidate but dismissing his chances of being elected.

"as he was an old Missouri judge and rebel. The Democrats say that they would not feel so badly about it but that I am the blackest man in the county politically." With political success and his store's prosperity seemingly assured by the steady market created by Fort Ellis, Lester came to feel that his future lay with the new territory.

When business improved dramatically over the summer months, he wrote to Emma to ask if she would consider living in Bozeman. "I

43. Lester Willson to Emma D. Weeks, June 30, 1868, Collection 884, Mrs. Lester S. Willson Papers, 1864-1920, MSU Libraries (hereafter Mrs. L. Willson Papers).

44. Lester Willson to Mary Cory, September 18, 1868, *ibid.*

45. Farmington, voted as the Gallatin County seat in May 1866, was a proposed townsite owned by Charles Blakely. When the issue again surfaced in 1867 the vote was between Gallatin City and Farmington, although Bozeman was the intended

knew she [Emma] would be very much surprised when I asked the question," he told Mary Cory, "as I had told her that I should never ask her to come.

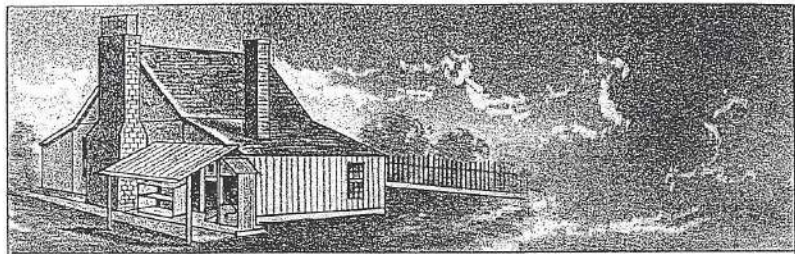
I have thought all this time that I should return to the states this fall and settle down. But I cannot get away from here without a loss, am well established and doing much better than any place I know of East with the same amount of Capital. The future of the country does not look as dark as a year ago and as the RR approaches, which it does with a vigor unprecedented and unlooked for, we are given advantages and are near home and friends. I have [received] some goods this summer only 12 days from New York.<sup>44</sup>

When December arrived Lester traveled to Virginia City to attend the fifth territorial legislative assembly, but the session proved anticlimactic. His major effort was to secure passage of an act officially establishing the name of "Bozeman City" for the Gallatin county seat.<sup>45</sup> As soon as the assembly adjourned on January 15, 1869, Lester boarded a stage for New York. After their wedding on March 2, Emma and Lester returned to Bozeman with a huge stock of goods, including Emma's piano. Learning from past mistakes, they avoided rail connections and made their passage to Fort Benton in the relative comfort of a Missouri River steamboat. At Fort Benton, the freight was unloaded for the long

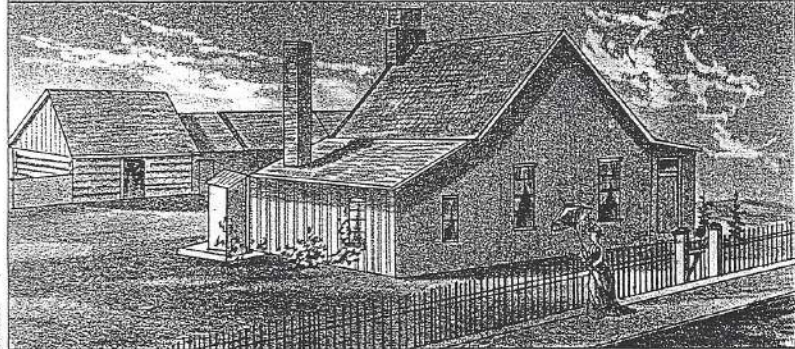
location of the latter. A special act of the legislature was required to settle the confusion. See *Laws of the Territory of Montana Passed at the Second Session of the Legislature* (Virginia City, Montana Territory, 1866), 12; *Laws of the Territory of Montana Passed at the Third Session of the Legislature* (Virginia City, Montana Territory, 1866), 77; *Laws, Memorials and Resolutions of the Territory of Montana passed at the Fifth Session of the Legislative Assembly* (Helena, Montana Territory, 1869), 110.



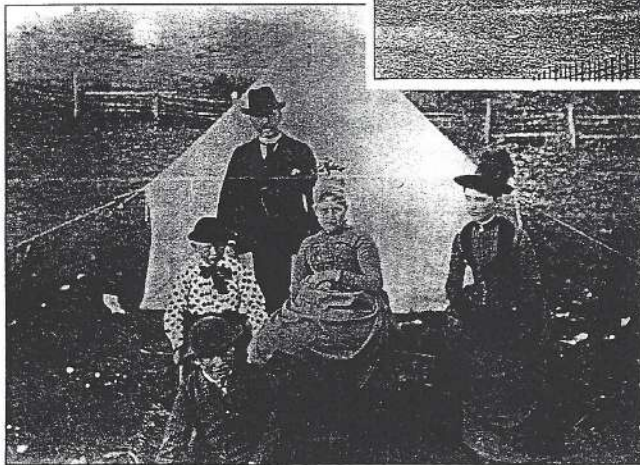
When Lester Willson brought Emma to Bozeman as a new bride in summer 1869, he presented her with what may have been the finest residence in Bozeman at the time. The house pictured at right was a remodeled and enlarged log cabin dating from 1864 and newly covered in clapboards. Below, Lester stands with his family in an undated photograph that includes (from left) sons Eugene and Fred (foreground), Emma, and Davis's wife. Davis married Martha Van Allen on May 18, 1874.



BACK VIEW.



From [Lecount], *History of Montana, 1739-1885* (Chicago: 1885), 1211



journey overland to Gallatin County. Arrived at Bozeman, Lester took Emma to their new home, a large log cabin, which stood just east of the Willson and Rich store. Built in 1864 by Daniel E. Rouse, Lester had purchased the cabin prior to his return east, had its log exterior covered with clapboards, and hired carpenters to add rooms during the remodeling.

Like the Willson home, Bozeman soon covered its frontier origins with the veneer of civilization. New businesses began to take root along Main Street, forcing Willson to sharpen his business

acumen and specialize in the types of merchandise the store offered. The arrival of a surveying crew led by William Milnor Roberts on August 29, 1869, from the projected Northern Pacific Railroad terminus in Washington state made Lester, and many others, think the railroad would arrive soon. "We are to have the N.P.R.R.," he wrote Mary Cory the following February, "and . . . we are waiting to get rich out of it."<sup>46</sup>

The railroad proved longer in coming than he thought, but Lester and Emma prospered with the

did not join either Bozeman Masonic lodge even though he had been initiated into the fraternity before coming to Montana. *Progressive Men of the State of Montana* (Chicago, 1901), 815.

growing town and learned to love the country. Several times in subsequent years they made plans to return east but always found some reason to postpone the move by investing money in mining claims or banking ventures. By the early 1870s, an influx of settlers from other parts of the country had diluted the number of Southerners in Gallatin County, and Lester eventually abandoned Union League activities. In 1872, he lobbied briefly and unsuccessfully for appointment as federal Indian commissioner for the territory. After serving in the 1868 legislature, he held to his professed aversion to politics and never again held elective public office.

Davis Willson succeeded in his apparent quest to find his own independent identity in Montana quite separate from his older brother. On April 24, 1869, Davis formally entered Gallatin Lodge Number 6, one of the last Northerners to be raised before the organization's charter was revoked. Rather than join his brother, Lester helped form the rival lodge of

46. Lester Willson to Mary Cory, February 19, 1870, L. Willson Papers.

47. Charles Rich, Lester's cousin, business partner, and fellow Union veteran,

48. *Bozeman Courier*, April 7, 1915; Davis Willson information file, Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin College, Ohio.

49. *Butte Miner*, January 28, 1919.



# MRS. WILLSON LAID TO REST

Last Tributes by the Rev. Klemme  
With Many Friends at the Pres-  
byterian Church.

Under a bank of most beautiful flowers, the body of Mrs. Bester S. Willson was laid to rest beside the grave of her husband in the family lot at the Bozeman cemetery Friday afternoon, after appropriate funeral services had been held and the many friends had joined the family in the last tributes to one they loved and esteemed most highly, and whose memory will ever be cherished by the citizens of Bozeman.

Private services were held at the former home of Mrs. Willson on Willson avenue south, Friday morning at 11 o'clock, for the family, and at 11:30 the body was removed from the home, where it had been since her death, to the First Presbyterian church, where for nearly three hours the numerous friends had an opportunity for a last loving look before the casket was closed.

The auditorium of the church was filled with friends of the deceased and her family, members of William English post, G. A. R., attending in a body, and were seated in the front of the church, behind the pallbearers. Behind them were seated the employes of The Willson company store, who also attended in a body, the store being closed for the day on account of the funeral. In the church were representatives of other business houses, closed during the services. There were a large number of people who had known Mrs. Willson for many years, and those who had been associated with her in various departments of the church work.

Mrs. E. O. Holm presided at the pipe organ, playing appropriate music at the beginning and the close of the services and the accompanist for the singers. Miss Katherine Story sang Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." Mrs. W. N. Purdy sang "The End of a Perfect Day," and the chorus choir of the church sang "Abide With Me." The floral tributes were numerous and most beautiful, covering and surrounding the casket.

The Rev. H. G. Klemme conducted the services, and spoke most beautifully of the life of Mrs. Willson and her influence for good in the community. He suggested that, if the audience might hear echoes, they would hear strains of music that the church would echo from the songs Mrs. Willson had sung within its walls. He painted mental pictures to illustrate in a measure some of the work done by Mrs. Willson during the half century she had lived in Bozeman, going back to pioneer days, when the sounds of her singing, coming through the open window, were instrumental in stopping serious disturbances on the streets of

the city. The next picture was of her singing at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organization of the Presbyterian church, when she was in the prime of life and her voice was at its best. Another picture recalled her singing of "The Holy City" at the fiftieth anniversary of the church, when many listened with fear lest she should break down in the midst of the song, but he said those who heard her would well remember how she carried the strains wonderfully to the end. The fourth picture Mr. Klemme mentioned as that during the last weeks of her illness, when, even in her weak condition, her voice seemed strong as she sang strains of "The End of a Perfect Day." Mr. Klemme spoke of the beautiful home life of Mrs. Willson, giving her deserved praise as a wife, a mother, a neighbor and a friend.

A large number of those attending the services at the church accompanied the family with the remains to the Bozeman cemetery, the pallbearers being C. W. Jackson, R. P. Seiditz and T. O. Wilton of The Willson company store, Edwin T. Rich, S. G. Phillips and J. H. Baker. The honorary pallbearers, members of the session of the Presbyterian church, were Prof. Alfred Atkinson, Prof. R. A. Cooley, Prof. F. S. Cooley, C. N. Wood, W. T. Thompson, John Wylie, W. E. Harmon and P. C. Waite.



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# MRS. WILLSON PASSES AWAY

## Peaceful Death of One of Montana's Pioneer Women at Her Boze- man Home.

Mrs. Lester S. Willson, who came to Bozeman as a bride fifty-four years ago and who has made her home here during the past half century, passed away peacefully at her home on Willson avenue south Wednesday morning, April 11, at 2:20. Death was not unexpected by the family and her friends, as her condition had been critical for several days and she was unconscious much of the time during her last illness. She was one of Montana's most highly esteemed pioneer women, and while she was known best through her wonderful voice, contributing as she has to the pleasure of the people of this community and other parts of Montana by her sweet singing, she has also been active in the religious and social life of the community.

The body of Mrs. Willson is at the West funeral parlors, and funeral services will be held Friday afternoon at 2:30, at the First Presbyterian church. The body will lie in state at the church on Friday, from 11:30 a. m. to 2:15 p. m. when it may be viewed by the friends.

Mrs. Willson's maiden name was Emma D. Weeks. She was born at Perkinsville, Vermont, March 13, 1841. As a small girl she moved with her parents to Lowell, Massachusetts, where her girlhood days were spent and where she received her schooling. Here also she began the study of music. As a young woman she went to Albany, New York, where she continued to study music and had charge of the music of the First Presbyterian church. Here she sang with Madame Albany, who later went to Europe to study and became a noted singer in England.

While living in Albany, she went out to the Soldiers' home at times to sing for the sick and disabled soldiers, and it was during these visits that she met General Lester S. Willson, who at that time had charge of the Soldiers' home. She came west in 1867 and became in

and Bozeman avenue south, this apartment having been neatly arranged and fitted up by Charles Rich, who was engaged in business with Mr. Willson for a few years. The second home was in a small log house east of this building that was built by D. E. Rouse in the early days. Later the family moved to a house on the corner now occupied by the First Presbyterian church, and about 35 years ago they moved to the more commodious home a few blocks further south where they made their permanent home on what was then known as Central avenue, now called Willson avenue south. Here General Willson died in 1919.

Three children were born to General and Mrs. Willson. Charles, born in January, 1873, and died in September of that year; Eugene, born in November, 1879, and died in November, 1893; and Fred F. Willson of Bozeman, who is well known over the state as an architect. There are two grandchildren, Lester and Virginia, children of Mr. and Mrs. Fred F. Willson. Mrs. Willson is the last of her family, all her brothers and sisters having died, and her last nephew passing away a few months ago.

During her life in Bozeman, Mrs. Willson has contributed most generously to the pleasure of the citizens and to visitors with her wonderfully sweet voice, singing not only at the Presbyterian church, with which she was identified, but also for other churches in the early days, especially in the little Methodist church, the first church built in the city. When Bishop Tuttle, the pioneer Episcopal bishop of Montana, visited Bozeman, she assisted by singing at his services.

She was a charter member of the First Presbyterian church of Bozeman, the only charter members now living being Mrs. Mary E. Perkins of Bozeman, and Mrs. S. W. Langhorne of Helena. She has sung at the installation of every pastor since the church was organized, including that of the present pastor. When the church celebrated the fiftieth anniversary last summer, she sang "The Holy City," much to the enjoyment of her old-time friends, as well as those who had known her in later years. She has been active in the various organizations of the church until her failing health prevented further activities.

Mrs. Willson also took an active part in the social life of the city, many delightful affairs, especially of a musical nature, being given at her home. She took part in hundreds of



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The first home of General Willson and his bride was on the second floor of the frame building formerly located on the southeast corner of Main street

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Mrs. Willson also took an active part in the social life of the city, many delightful affairs, especially of a musical nature, being given at her home. She took part in hundreds of programs at local entertainments and at private homes. The pioneers enjoyed her singing at many of their gatherings, and the G. A. R. veterans remember many occasions that she sang for them. She had a charming personality, and one who has been closely associated with her for many years says that she never heard Mrs. Willson say an unkind word of any person. She will be pleasantly remembered by a host of friends.

**NOTICE TO FARMERS AND BLACKSMITHS**

All machinery to be sold at the W. P. Schrink sale, Tuesday, April 17th, has been thoroughly overhauled and painted.—Adv.

Montana was divided into territorial districts and they by the territory years ago today, Sanders, secretary of the historical society and Montana Pioneer bulletin of "Montana" issued for today, April 13, 1905 (Friday).

the Lewis and Clark expedition the Missouri, where the rest of the territory was settled.

"We sent out fresh meat. Get beaver swimming idently not hunted gathered some water, finding the taste. They are the size of a buffalo turned without a

"The Little Missouri It passes through the Black Hills, with the waters considerable distance hills. The country and has little timber fertile and deep.

1806 (Saturday) Clark party was

**Polworth's Great One Day Sale**  
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At Home Magazine - October 2000  
Pages 4, 5, 6

Willson House  
at 504 So. Willson





# SENTINEL to HISTORY

*Original 1886 Willson house offers a step back in time*



BY ANN BUTTERFIELD  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

Many of us have probably entered our childhood home and said, "It's a lot smaller than I remember." That is what Duncan Kippen, a Bozeman artist, said about his ancestral home at 504 S. Willson Ave. The house may seem smaller in size, but it is still large with memories and history.

Many of the memories and pieces of history remain, thanks to Gladys Samson, who owns the house at 504 S. Willson Ave. Her stewardship is remarkable. The house abounds with history in the lives of the people who resided there, and the house itself speaks of other times. Today a grand piano sits in the parlor, just like 1886 when the house was built, and Mrs. Emma Weeks Willson played the piano. As an accomplished musician, Mrs. Willson sang and played the piano for special events in Bozeman, sometimes giving as many as four recitals on a Sunday for the different denominations.

Mrs. Willson came to Bozeman as the bride of Gen. Lester Willson, after whom the street was named. Gen. Willson operated the Willson Store, a mercantile business on Main Street. When they first arrived in Bozeman, the Willsons lived in a log cabin. As Bozeman





prospered, so did some of the residents, and the Willsons were able to build this delightful house. The estimated cost of construction was \$8,000.

It was also the home in which Fred Willson, the architect, grew up and later lived with his family until his death.

The exterior and interior integrity of this house has been maintained. It is very easy to step back in time. Some of the pictures on the walls hang where Gen. and Mrs. Willson put them before the turn of the century. The Fred Willsons added other pictures. The Samsons have added their own. These pictures chronicle the life and times of the inhabitants. In 1956, Helen Willson, the wife of Fred Willson, redecorated with silk grass or hand-blocked wallpaper. At the same time, new window treatments were hung. These period pieces of decorating still remain.

Today the decorating is in vogue, thanks to the Samsons' great care. The Samsons have not made the house into a museum or mausoleum. Far from it. The house is lived in, but it is evident the house is loved and respected for what it is — a piece of history. Some of the furniture came with the house, and other pieces have been added, but the style and personality of the house remains in tact.

All of the original, cherry-wood fireplaces with





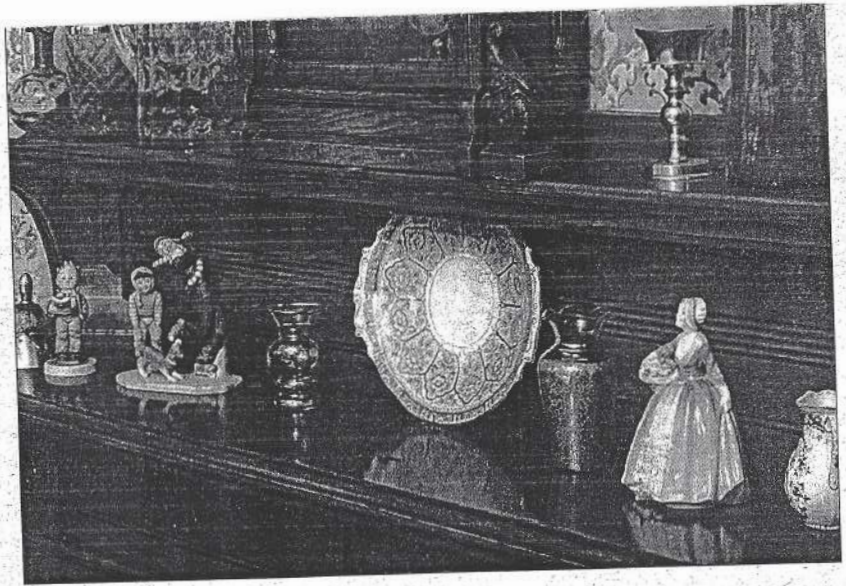
intricate carvings remain. In 1910 photos, drapes to keep heat in and drafts out of the individual rooms are seen on the doorways. Drapes are still there. On two of the mantles are clocks that have sat there for more than 100 years. On either side of the entry fireplace mantle sit cat-like figures. These figures originally held lamps. One cat also wore a rosary that Fred Willson obtained while in Rome in 1906, when he had an audience with the pope. Small sconces replaced the cats on the wall, but the cats are still there, and the rosary beads belong to a Willson descendant.

The automobile made an impact on the Willson Avenue home. In 1911, the barn was made into a garage, and an attached garage became part of the house. This addition was never used for parking. The high ceiling room with wooden floors became a playroom for grandchildren. One Willson grandchild hoped it might be made into a basketball court.

The house has only been inhabited by the Willson family and the Samsons. In 1926, Fred Willson considered selling "the old" house and "moving to other parts," and Montana State University offered to buy the house for the president of the university.

Fred Willson comments in his diaries from time to time how much he enjoyed the house, especially the sleeping porch. He also wrote how much work the house required, especially when full-scale cleaning took place every spring and fall.

Although the house stands as a reminder of a young Bozeman, changes have taken place. The original fixtures remain in most of the bathrooms, and especially



Above, the grand clock – like other pieces of furniture left behind when the Willson family sold the house – has been a fixture of the home for the last hundred years. On the opposite page, the elegant dining room and the exterior of the historic home.



The home's parlor, like several other rooms in the house, is decorated much the way it was in the early 1900s.



### Willson

charming is a marble-topped vanity. In one of the bathrooms, the original tin shower stall is now ceramic. New appliances replaced the original, wood-burning stove and condensing refrigerator. However, the cooling cupboard and cold-storage rooms still exist. In the study, a computer sits under a picture of Gen. Willson and a few of his comrades. This room once displayed Gen. Willson's memorabilia from the Civil War. Standing in the room you can feel the change and still imagine the past.

In interviews with those who have lived in the house, their personal memories are very vivid. One of Beverly Willson Morrison's fondest

children — Lester, Virginia and Beverly — were taken through the town on a sleigh with bells and pulled by horses. The family went out to deliver homemade candies and gifts to friends and family. Gladys Samson treasures the parlor, too, where her husband enjoyed his talent as a musician, and the dining room, which held seminars for her husband's students at Montana State University.

Changes have taken place in Bozeman and in the house. Yet the white clapboard house stands as a sentinel to Bozeman's history and a tribute to the memories, both personal and public, for those who cherish the past. ©