

Mary McDonald



Richard and Mary Harris McDonald

# Whip and a Green Bottle Played

## 'Grandma' Wouldn't Part With Either During Trek

By ANNABELLE PHILLIPS

Many would call it ugly and toss the ordinary, round, pale green glass bottle in the trash.

The whip, too, would go.

"Grandma" wouldn't part with either. To her the bottle was not only beautiful, it was a treasured thing — almost as precious as the old, braided rawhide whip.

When "Grandma" died in 1941 — she was 100 years old — her pride in the small bottle and worn whip had been so instilled in her family that the only living members — an 87-year-old daughter and a granddaughter — pridefully display them in their home today, along with beautiful silver, dishes and furniture.

And could they speak, what a story the bottle and whip could tell.

Richard McDonald was nearing 30 when he hand-braided the whip from carefully cut strips of choice rawhide. He would need a strong whip for the six oxen which would pull his covered wagon on the trek westward.

His young wife, Mary Harris McDonald, was also a busy

woman. She must pick clothing, medicines and sturdy, useful household items which would withstand the rough journey ahead. Among these she tucked in the thick, green glass bottle.

The new, long rawhide whip cracked smartly as Richard, Mary and their six-month-old son, Robert, set out from St. Joseph in 1863 in company with Dr. Harris Robinson and his wife.

They trailed with them a fine herd of cattle.

Indians were only one of the many hardships and perils which confronted the Robinsons and McDonalds.

The green bottle was all important. It became the "camphor" bottle.

When only a few drops were left, Mary would drop in camphor crystals, fill the bottle with whiskey (as her granddaughter remembers) and after a short spell of "setting" there would again be a supply of camphor — a medicine which served many purposes.

As they pushed steadily westward tragedy struck.

Richard and Mary never

dreamed, as they buried their infant son beside the dusty trail that this was only their first such heartbreak. Three more times they were destined to bury their sons. Never would one of them reach manhood.

About six months after leaving "St. Joe," the Robinson-McDonald party arrived in bustling Virginia City.

The McDonalds stayed in the flourishing gold mining town for a short time, then moved on.

With their wagon, six oxen and a few cattle from the herd they a few cattle from the herd they arrived in Bozeman in 1864, the year the town was founded.

There were only a few buildings dotting the lush, expansive valley when Richard and Mary arrived.

A little south of what was to become the center of today's main business district, the young couple found a spot to their liking. They filed a homestead claim.

Now Richard's whip and the oxen began to play an even more important part in the McDonald's life. Bozeman was beginning to grow and there was freight to be hauled. Richard accepted the challenge.

From his arrival here until the rapidly growing railroad made private freighting unprofitable, Richard and his oxen made trip after trip hauling freight between Bozeman and Virginia City. After that he did odd jobs.

In the meantime, a daughter, Mollie, was born to the McDonalds. She arrived April 20, 1873, and was the first colored child born in Gallatin Valley.

As the years passed the McDonalds were blessed with children five more times.

There were three more sons and three more heartbreaks. Lewis died at 15 years, Eddie lived only six months and Arthur died when he was 12.

A second daughter, Belle McDonald, was born Oct. 2, 1874.

A third, Melissa, was born Oct. 2, 1878.

When a young woman, Mollie, through marriage, became Mollie McDonald Gross. She had one daughter, Belle, who is now Mrs. Belle W. Fisher.

In 1910, when Hamilton Hall was built at Montana State College, Mollie Gross was employed as head cook. She held this position for 20 years.

Belle McDonald, the second daughter, never married. She died Feb. 22, 1950.

of our house. Mother spoke often of skating on the frozen stream.

"I've often asked people if they remember the creek, but none seem to. I wonder where it originated and what happened to it."

(It is believed the creek referred to was what later became known as Spring Creek, although an old map indicates

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Mollie McDonald Gross



# ayed Role in McDonalds' Lives

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Sour Dough or Bozeman Creek may have branched westward. It is known that a stream flowed from the south just east of the present location of the Ellen Theater. Incumbent city officials have also stated that there is evidence today of an underground stream in the vicinity of Tracy and Curtiss.)

"I can remember Grandmas making soap," Mrs. Fisher reminisced. "She had a big, long-handled spoon and never failed to taste the soap to see if there was enough lye in it. Imagine how it must have tasted!"

There's a beautiful old clock hanging on the kitchen wall of the McDonald home. Laughingly, the granddaughter recalled:

"I love that old clock. But it hasn't any works. One day it stopped running and Grandma was most put out. She took the insides out and threw them away. But she left the shell hanging."

"Grandma" was a kindly woman, always ready to lend a hand to a neighbor in need. And today, there are probably many who recall at least one of the innumerable times this courageous little woman—married Jan. 20, 1861, in St. Joseph—offered



Richard and Mary Harris McDonald

not only her time, but her comfort and knowledge, gleaned through years of experience, to

help those in trouble.

This trait, too, like the pride in the pale, green glass bottle

and worn whip, was instilled in her daughters and granddaughter.

BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE NEWSMAKERS

# A place to call home

## McDonald house holds history of freed slaves who helped settle Bozeman

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The year 2011 marks the 100th anniversary of Bozeman's only daily newspaper, and as part of the celebration, the Chronicle will present a variety of historical perspectives in its news pages.

Each Sunday throughout the year, on this page, our writers and editors will take a look back at the people deemed the top 100 newsmakers of the past century.

**BY GAIL SCHONTZLER**  
Chronicle Staff Writer

The simple two-story house at 308 S. Tracy Ave. may be more humble than the Story Mansion, but it too has tales to tell that shine light on Bozeman's history.

It was built by Richard and Mary Harris McDonald, an African-American couple who were born into slavery.

The McDonalds arrived in Bozeman in 1864, the year the town was founded. Their two-story house — believed to have been constructed around the couple's original 1864 cabin — was built in 1872, making it the first two-story home in Bozeman. Their children and grandchildren lived in the home continuously for more than 120 years.

The historic house is now owned by Bob Nute, a retired investment banker, and his wife, Joanna, a former university administrator.

Nute grew up just a few houses away on South Tracy and knew the McDonald family descendants well. His mother was best friends with the last McDonald family member, Belle Fisher. When she died in 2000, she left the house to Nute.

He also inherited a small tin box, about 6-inches long, that Richard and Mary McDonald used to hold their money and a few prized possessions when they came out to Montana in an ox-drawn wagon. It was soldered shut during the trip.

"They buried it every night when they came from St. Joseph, Missouri," Nute said. Today it holds tintype photos of Richard and Mary McDonald.

Mary also brought with her to Montana a photo of her mother, according to news articles collected at the Gallatin County Historical Society's Pioneer Museum. "Mary had been taken from her mother as a child, and had only that picture for remembrance," according to one report.

The Civil War broke out in 1861, the year Richard and Mary married in Missouri. President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves in the rebellious Confederate states in 1863, but did not cover slaves in border states like Missouri. The fact that they were freed, Nute said, suggests "they must have had a good master."

Richard was nearly 30 and Mary about 22 when they headed west with other families in 1863. They had a wagon drawn by six oxen, a few possessions and 6-month-old son Robert,



Melissa McDonald poses in this undated photograph.

buildings on Main Street.

"Mary was afraid of Native Americans and allowed a group of them to take Richard's second pair of pants, which they had observed hanging on the clothesline," reported the Gallatin County Tribune and Belgrade Journal. "Richard had to get along with one pair for a while. Clothes were scarce, but they were always clean. At times food, too, was short, but Mary made sure the children had enough to eat."

Their daughter Mollie, born in 1873, was the first black child born in the Gallatin Valley.



Golden History House

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The McDonalds soon buried their  
 infant son "beside the dusty trail,"  
 Chronicle reporter Annabelle Phillips  
 wrote in a 1964 interview with their  
 youngest daughter Melissa, then 86,  
 and granddaughter Fisher.

It took the McDonalds about five  
 months to reach Montana's Virginia  
 City, where gold had recently been  
 discovered. It was too "wild and  
 woolly" for a family, Nute said, so they  
 soon moved to tiny Bozeman. Their  
 second son Eddy, born in Virginia  
 City, also died after a few months.  
 Richard went to work hauling freight  
 with his wagon and oxen. It took  
 seven days just to transport goods  
 from Bozeman to Virginia City, Nute  
 said, and Richard sometimes hauled as  
 far as Fort Benton.

That left Mary alone for long  
 stretches with her children in their  
 home, built on what was then a  
 bit of prairie a little south of most



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Of the seven children Mary bore,  
 two boys died in infancy and two boys  
 died by age 15, but her three daughters  
 survived.

Mary and Richard worked at Fort  
 Ellis for a time, and an officer being  
 transferred back East wanted them to  
 come with him, Nute said. But they  
 had had enough of being servants.

Among Mary's prized possessions  
 were a rawhide whip Richard had  
 made for their trip out West and a  
 green glass bottle that held camphor  
 and whiskey, which served as their all-  
 purpose medicine on the journey.

Fisher told the Chronicle that  
 Grandma McDonald "was a little,  
 short, heavyset woman, but always  
 so jolly. Her life centered around her  
 home and family." She never missed  
 Sunday worship at the First Methodist  
 Church. She lived to the age of 100.

"Grandma' was a kindly woman,  
 always ready to lend a hand to a  
 neighbor in need," Phillips wrote.



The South Tracy home built by Richard and Mary McDonald in 1872.

Slaves like the McDonalds had been  
 freed, but racism remained deeply  
 entrenched, and Bozeman reflected  
 the racial attitudes of its times.

Two years before Richard Mc-  
 Donald died in 1898 at age 65, the  
 Chronicle published an obituary for  
 Samuel Lewis, the town's black barber.  
 Originally from Haiti, Lewis had made  
 himself a successful businessman who  
 owned several properties. The obitu-  
 ary praised Lewis as a "good citizen  
 ... generally liked" whose opinion was  
 valued in the community, and who  
 owned a "beautiful residence."

"Mr. Lewis, though a colored man,  
 was treated by his neighbors with

courtesy and respect," the obituary  
 said. "His color was never taken into  
 consideration, except in social matters.  
 Even there the old citizens have invari-  
 ably done him the honor of inviting  
 him to their homes; but, possessed of a  
 realizing sense of the unfitness of this,  
 he never attended."

Fifty years later, things had changed  
 little. For a Pioneer Museum exhibit  
 on minorities, Esther Nelson recalled  
 when soprano Dorothy Maynor came  
 to Bozeman to perform. Maynor was  
 refused a room at the Baxter Hotel  
 because she was black.

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## McDonald/

from E1

Nelson, a member of the Bozeman Community Concert Association, demanded to speak to the hotel owner, "as treatment of such an important visitor was intolerable." He also refused her a room. Maynor stayed instead at the home of the university's vocal director.

Montana in general and Bozeman in particular never had large black populations, as the Pioneer Museum's exhibit on minorities noted.

"The few African-Americans who lived in Gallatin County throughout its history faced racial barriers — barriers not as pronounced as in other parts of the country, but barriers nonetheless. ... (They) overcame racist stereotypes and contributed to the community's growth."

"Belle (Fisher) was a wonderful woman, and so were her mother and aunt," Nute said of the McDonald women. "They were quite reserved. They had seen some ill treatment."

He laughed when asked how he feels about the historic house he has inherited.

"I've never been sure it's an asset," Nute said. Yet he and his wife are working to figure out how to preserve the house. They have pulled from its walls 1870s copies of the New York Times, which served as insulation for more than a century. They are getting expert advice on how to fix a corner of the house that has sunk several inches.

"She left it to me," Nute said and smiled, "because she knew I would take care of it."

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From: *Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley: a history*  
by Phyllis Smith

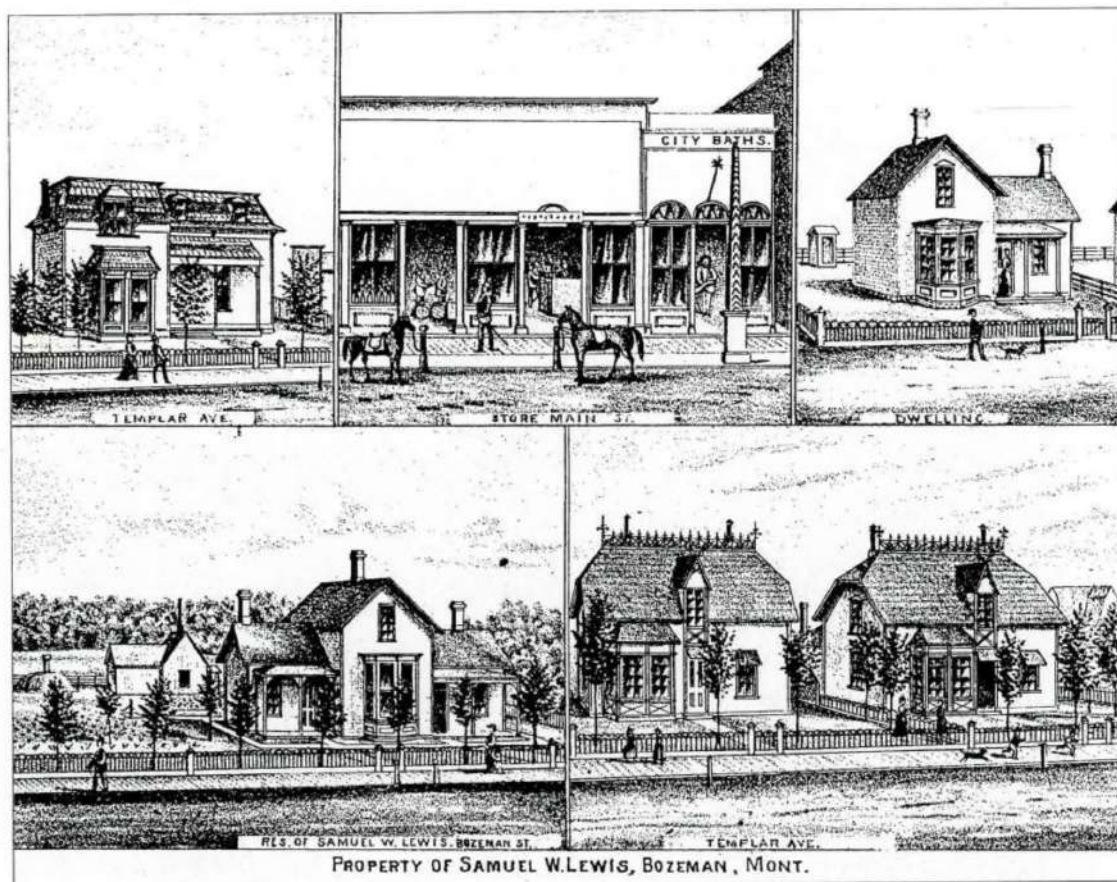
Chapter TWELVE

Samuel E. Lewis traveled to many places before he decided on Bozeman in 1868. A black native of Haiti, Lewis spent several years traveling in Europe, then investigated gold camps in California, Oregon, and Idaho where he earned his living as a barber. He cut hair in Elk Creek, Radersburg, and Helena as well. After he arrived in Bozeman, he built the Lewis Block on the south side of East Main Street, which housed a number of businesses, including his barber shop and bath house. The genial Lewis participated in Bozeman civic affairs, often singing at public events, accompanying himself with a harp, banjo, or guitar. His son took up the guitar and accompanied his father on these occasions. Lewis built twin houses at 209 and 211 South Tracy Avenue and a residence for his family at 308 South Bozeman Avenue.

When his half-sister Edmonia was sixteen in 1859, Lewis encouraged the talented girl to apply to Oberlin, one of the few American colleges that would accept a black woman. After Oberlin, Lewis sent Edmonia abroad to study art in Florence, where she became a noted sculptor. When Lewis died in 1886, one hundred mourners attended his funeral; Mayor Frank L. Benepe gave the eulogy.

A few other American black families also sought refuge in the West from an uncertain future during the Civil War years. Richard and Mary McDonald left their home in Saint Joseph, Missouri, in 1864, and traveled by covered wagon with their three children to the new Montana Territory. They bought land near Sourdough Creek on what is now 308 South Tracy and built a cabin. The family fished the creek for summer meals; in

*Successful barber and builder Samuel Lewis owned a number of private and commercial structures in town. (Templar Avenue is the present Tracy Avenue.)* ETCHING FROM MICHAEL LEESON, *HISTORY OF MONTANA*, 1885.



winter, the children enjoyed skating on the frozen stream. McDonald began freighting goods from Bozeman to Virginia City; by 1872, he was affluent enough to build a two-story home around the original cabin.

Years later, Melinda M. Rich described her first impressions of the settlement:

Back of everything else is a confused picture in which are mule trains, and ox trains, emigrant wagons and cowboys with bucking horses, and the welcome arrival of the stage coach that brought to us the letters which told us of all the dear ones left behind in the old home. Not infrequently numbers of Indians would camp near town, coming every day to the dwellings, standing outside the houses with noses flattened against the window panes. At times whole tribes passed through, the chiefs in advance often dismounting to visit the stores. Squaws and papooses followed mounted upon all sorts and sizes of horses, which were otherwise laden with pots and kettles and

other articles belonging to the household, with lodge poles trailing behind. The sounds of murderous pistol shots were often heard at midnight or in the early morning hours. Then followed the measured tread of men's feet as they bore some dead or wounded body away from the midnight revel. The deadly thing that usually instigated the murders and the angry shouts and curses which so often rang out upon the midnight air, was sold in low board houses.<sup>4</sup>

The "deadly thing," of course, was liquor, which Melinda Rich, a founding member of the local Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), abhorred.

What Melinda Rich heard as bumps in the night quite possibly were men dragging drunks or other hapless law-breakers to the edge of town. It was customary in many western communities for a judge to fine the miscreant or banish him from the territory; there was no need for a jail building. O. D. Loutzenheiser, the county's first sheriff,

*Members of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows line the street before the J. W. Tilton building and a photograph gallery.*





**[TURN DIRECTLY SOUTH AND LEAD THE GROUP BETWEEN THE GRAVES TO THE ROAD APPROXIMATELY 195 TO THE SOUTH. FOLLOW THE ROAD (DIVISION AVENUE) WEST APPROXIMATELY 105 FEET. AT THE SECOND LARGE PINE EAST OF THE UPCOMING INTERSECTION ON THE LEFT HAND (SOUTH) SIDE OF THE ROAD, MOVE NORTH. LOOK FOR A LOW-LYING BROWN AND PINK GRANITE STONE WITH THE NAME MCDONALD.]**

- 17. RICHARD McDONALD: b. 1833, d. 1898  
MARY McDONALD: b. 1841, d. 1941**

**Richard and Mary McDonald were freed African American slaves who came to Virginia City, Montana, in 1864--the year of Bozeman's establishment. The McDonald's were part of a steady trickle of blacks pushed westward fleeing the chaos of the Civil War and the racial oppression of the American South.**

**Enlightened whites, like John Martin, editor of the Atchison (Kansas) Champion, encouraged the trend in January of 1865, asserting : "Give the Negro a chance to make a man of himself . . . Treat him as a human being and he will quickly assert by his own capacities and exertions his right to be regarded as one."**

**The more liberating influence of the frontier afforded new opportunities for many former slaves and Richard and Mary McDonald were no exception. With the approval of the Territorial Suffrage Act on January 31, 1867, Black males in western territories--including Montana--gained voting rights at least three years before the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. That same year, for example, two hundred black men cast ballots in the Montana territorial election.**

**By the census of 1870, Bozeman City boasted a growing population of 168 residents--including small populations of Chinese and African Americans. Disappointed miners**

steadily returned to work Bozeman's rich agricultural lands and with them, increasing numbers of women and children also settled in the Gallatin Valley. Among these early settlers were Richard and Mary McDonald, who were attracted to Bozeman in 1872. Like several of his contemporaries, McDonald made a comparatively modest living freighting supplies from Bozeman to the surrounding mining camps and back again via wagon. The former slaves are rumored to have constructed their modest two-story frame residence on South Tracy Avenue in close proximity to Bozeman Creek which provided a ready supply of water, ice, and fish for the hard-working family.

It was a time when the town's prospects appeared to be brightening. Local population levels had soared to an estimated 800 people by 1872. Reverend Crittenden and his daughter, Mary, established the Bozeman Academy in Good Templar Hall and a "Young Men's Library Association" utilized space above Alwards Drug store. To finance growing numbers of real estate transactions, Leander Black created the town's first financial institution, the First National Bank of Bozeman, in August of that year. Most significantly, the designation of Yellowstone National Park brought the promise of further renown to the region, bolstering the spirits of local developers and a cautious but growing sense of permanence. Such optimism most clearly manifested itself in the construction of the community's earliest brick buildings in 1872 and 1873--arguably the most obvious expressions of local confidence and prosperity.

## Pioneer Of '64 Mrs. McDonald, Dies Monday

### Bozeman Woman Who Came By Ox Team Saw Entire History Of This County

(Bozeman Courier, 1/24/1941 – some words hidden in the binding)

A life which spanned the entire history of Gallatin county closed Monday at 11:25 p. m., with the death at her home at 308 South Tracy of Mrs. Mary McDonald. She had come to the Gallatin in the fall of 1864, after a few weeks' stopover(?) in turbulent Virginia City. \_\_\_ the same address in Bozeman \_\_\_ passed those 66 years which \_\_\_ the history of Montana and of \_\_\_ city and county. Mrs. McDonald was among the last, if not the(?) very last, of those whose adult \_\_\_ witnessed Bozeman in its first \_\_\_?

An invalid the past few years she retained a clear mind and on occasions(?) indulged in reminiscences of early days and of her life in Missouri before coming to Montana. Mrs. McDonald was Mary Harris as a maiden. She was born in(?) Jackson county, Missouri about \_\_\_(?) and was reared in Holt county. She was a member of a party including her husband of less than a year, the late Richard McDonald, and his brother and sister, all of whom accompanied Dr. Robinson, an(?) early-day Bozeman resident, on a four(?) -month journey across the plains by ox team. Leaving St. Joseph, Mo., in the spring their westward trek was concluded in September(?) of 1864.

Often Mrs. McDonald would recall(?) the hardships and perils of that journey. For those were dangerous times, -the country was infested with hostile Indians determined to prevent the advance of white(?) men. Into the Gallatin with them this party brought a fine herd of cattle. Mr. McDonald engaged(?) in freighting with ox teams for(?) a number of years and after the \_\_\_ vent of a railroad to the county, \_\_\_ worked at a variety of jobs until his death in 1898.

To the McDonalds were born six children, the first one in Virginia City and the remainder at the McDonald home on South Tracy from where(?) the funeral was conducted Wednesday. Three of the children survive, Mollie Gross, and Belle and Melissa McDonald all of Bozeman. She was preceded in death by a grandson, Richard Ward. Other survivors are Mr. and Mrs. Richard Fisher of Butte. Mrs. Fisher is the daughter of Mrs. Gross.

When the McDonald residence was erected on South Tracy all around it was prairie, and all that populous residence section adjoining has since grown up.

Mrs. McDonald was a member of the Methodist church since 1894. She was called "Grandma" by most everyone who knew her. A home person, she never sallied forth from that address on South Tracy frequently, but she had a legion of friends, as the profusion of flowers brought to the home Wednesday testified. The funeral was conducted by the Rev. O. M. Hoff and the Rev. Walter B. Spaulding. Mrs. Hoff sang two songs, "Sitting at the Feet of Jesus," and "The Old Rugged Cross." She was accompanied at the piano by Mrs. Charles Henry. Attending the funeral from out of the city beside the grandson-in-law, Mr. Fisher of Butte, was Mrs. Albert Marshall of Butte.

The pall bearers were Fred Wilson [should be Willson], Don Langohr, Jack Bartlett, E. F. Bunker, Mike O'Connell and Robert Esgar. The Dokken Funeral home was in charge of arrangements. Burial was in Sunset Hills cemetery.

vere lined up and waiting.

# RESIDENT OF MONTANA FOR 76 YEARS DIES

## Mrs. Mary McDonald, Thought to Be Nearly 100, Passes. Came to Montana By Wagon Train In 1864

Mrs. Mary McDonald, nearly 100, and a resident of Montana for more than three-fourths of a century, passed away late Monday night at her home, 308 South Tracy. She had estimated her age at nearly 100 years but the date of her birth could never be ascertained.

Mrs. McDonald was born Mary Harris in Jackson county, Missouri. She was reared in Holt county where, Mar. 21, 1863, she was married to Richard McDonald. They were Negroes and were among the first colored residents of the territory of Montana. They were brought to Montana by a Dr. Robinson with a wagon train of which was four months enroute. The people of the train underwent many hardships and were attacked by hostile Indians before reaching Virginia City.

Mr. and Mrs. McDonald came to Bozeman shortly after they arrived in Montana and came to be well-known and highly respected among the residents of this pioneer community. Mr. McDonald died here Nov. 20, 1898.

Mrs. McDonald had been a member of the Methodist church since 1894.

She is survived by three daughters, Mrs. Mollie Gross, Belle McDonald and Melissa McDonald, all of Bozeman, and a granddaughter, Mrs. Belle Fisher of Butte.

Funeral services will be conducted this afternoon at 2:30 o'clock at the home. Interment will be in Sunset Hills cemetery.

traditional boxes of candy, announcing their respective engagements.

Funeral services for Mrs. Mary McDonald were held at her home, 308 South Tracy, yesterday afternoon with the Rev. O. M. Hoff officiating and the Rev. W. B. Spaulding assisting. Mrs. Hoff sang "Old Rugged Cross" and "Sitting at the Feet of Jesus." Mrs. Charles Henry played the accompaniment. Fred Willson, E. F. Bunker, Don Langohr, M. J. O'Connell, Jack Bartlett and Robert Esgar, were pallbearers. Interment was in Sunset Hills cemetery.

Initiated into the Fraternal Order of Eagles last night were: Krudde George Hohensee Howard

## THE McDONALD FAMILY

Once the Civil War had ended, some of the freed slaves headed away from the South, toward the territories in the West. Richard and Mary McDonald stowed their few possessions in a four ox-team wagon and left St. Joseph, Missouri, accompanied by several other families.

Among their few possessions were several pieces of wooden cookware and a walking stick, all carved by Richard McDonald. A small moneybox held their funds. Mrs. McDonald also brought a bottle of camphor oil as their all-purpose medicine and a picture of her mother. She had been taken from her mother as a child, and had only that picture for remembrance.

The trip was not an easy one. Soon after the trip began, their infant son died and was buried along the trail. It took most of a year to arrive at Virginia City, Montana. There a second son, Eddy was born. The family didn't stay, but moved on to the Gallatin Valley where they built a one-room cabin. There, on April 30, 1873, their daughter Mollie, was born--the first African American child to be born in Gallatin County. The McDonalds eventually improved the cabin, adding floors, a bedroom, a kitchen and an upstairs room. Meantime, they also gradually increased the family, adding sons Lewis and Arthur and daughters Belle and Melissa. However, both sons died as young boys.

Richard McDonald operated a freight line between Bozeman and Virginia City. This left Mary and the children alone for long stretches of time. Mary was afraid of Native Americans and allowed a group of them to take Richard's second pair of pants, which they had observed hanging on the clothesline. Richard had to get along with one pair for a while. Clothes were scarce but they were always clean. At times, food, too, was short but Mary made sure the children had enough before she ate.

To be able to spend more time with his family, Richard began working odd jobs

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To be able to spend more time with his family, Richard began working odd jobs in Bozeman. One of these jobs was to lay clean straw under carpets. That was the padding of the time.

In 1898 the McDonalds began enlarging the kitchen once again. Richard died during the remodeling. After her father's death, Belle McDonald took over as head of the household. A family puzzle is why, after Richard died, Mary took the insides of the family clock out and discarded the parts. Mary McDonald lived to be one hundred years old.

Daughter Mollie married Charles Ward and bore two children, Belle, named after her aunt, and Richard. Mollie worked as a cook in Hamilton Hall (at that time a dormitory for the college), while her sister Melissa took care of the two children. Mollie learned that no local hotels would accept African Americans, including Booker T. Washington. College President Hamilton invited Booker to stay in his home. When Mr. Ward died, Mollie married Charles Gross.

Mollie's daughter, Belle, married Richard L. Fisher, and the couple spent thirty years in Butte. Richard died in 1950. After Mollie also died, Belle Fisher invited her only surviving relative, her aunt Melissa, to live with her in Butte, but Melissa didn't like Butte, and the two moved back to Bozeman. Melissa McDonald died in 1967.

Sources: Gallatin County Tribune and Belgrade Journal, 8-27-70.

## Historic McDonald Home

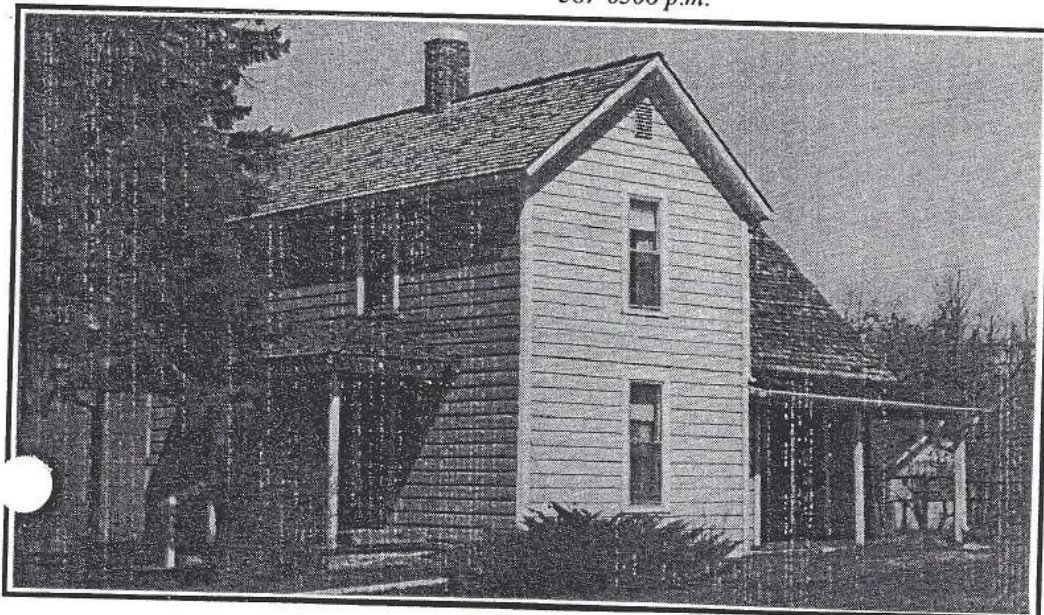
The McDonald house at 308 South Tracy, built to its present form in 1872, is one of the few residences remaining from Bozeman's earliest days. The oldest structure in Bozeman still occupied by descendants of its original builder, it has housed the McDonald family for over 120 years.

In 1864, Richard and Mary McDonald, the grandparents of present owner Mrs. Belle Fisher, left their home in St. Joseph, Missouri, in a covered wagon and travelled to Montana Territory. Like many African Americans fleeing upheaval in the South, the McDonalds sought a new life on the Western frontier. They found in Bozeman the opportunity to own their own land – the same land upon which the McDonald house rests today. Recalling the reports of her elders, Mrs. Fisher said "South Tracy area was nothing but a 'prairie' when her grandparents first filed their claim in Bozeman. West of the original cabin a small stream, thought to be a long-since rerouted branch of Sourdough Creek, provided fish in summer and a wonderful place for the three McDonald children to ice skate in winter. Before the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1883, Mr. McDonald had a lucrative freighting enterprise, moving goods of all types between Bozeman and Virginia City.

When this business became unprofitable, McDonald worked a variety of jobs in Bozeman.

1872 was a busy year for building in Bozeman. The population had risen to 800 from its previous 1870 census of 575. That year saw the construction of many homes and commercial structures. The McDonald house is a two-story frame building typifying the Mid-Atlantic I-House form, one room deep and two rooms wide. On the east elevation, a large sunny kitchen looks out on Mrs. Fisher's garden. Some reports have it that the McDonald house was constructed from materials left over from the numerous contemporary building projects in the town. Whether or not this is true, Mrs. Fisher points out that the I-House is built around the original cabin, a structure Mr. McDonald erected for his family upon their arrival in Bozeman in 1864.

*The McDonald home is indeed one of Bozeman's most significant historic resources, one physically intact and spiritually unaltered by human inconstancy. At this time, the house is in great need of a new roof. Anyone wishing to become involved in this important preservation project can write or send contributions to Fisher Roof, c/o Attorney Holly Brown, 409 South 22nd, Bozeman, MT 59715. Or, for more information, call Catherine Goetz, 586-3321, ext. 227 a.m.; 587-0506 p.m.*



Historic McDonald Home

# THE McDONALD HOUSE: PRESERVING ELEMENTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE



by **B. DEREK STRAIN**

When asked to contemplate what historic places are worthy of preservation, the answer is almost always the same — big, beautiful properties constructed by persons of great influence and notoriety. While these landmarks are certainly deserving of preservation efforts, other less obvious choices are often worthy of preservation too.

Preservationists who focus exclusively on the Story Mansions and Ellen Theaters of the world, holding a mere handful of glorious places as representative of those that came before us, fail to see the forest because of the trees. They celebrate the exceptional while disregarding the commonplace as less important.

History and historic preservation has been done this way for far too long. Ironically, what we preserve is often not especially representative of how most people lived. Most of us, as a result, know very little about the silent majority of working people who molded and shaped our communities.

Our towns are filled with interesting places, which — in spite of their modest appearances — have educational value and fascinating tales to tell. We should preserve these places and learn from their stories.

Case in point: the McDonald House, a simple, two-story frame house standing at 308 South Tracy Ave. It is unlikely that this unassuming structure would immediately jump to the top of anyone's must preserve list. Nonetheless, it represents a critical piece of Bozeman's historical landscape, shedding light not only on the evolution of Bozeman's early built environment, but on its elusive social history, about which we know so very little.

The Richard and Mary McDonald residence is worthy of preservation for many reasons, none of which are immediately apparent to the casual observer. Constructed in 1872 and perhaps earlier,

this fine example of the I-House building type is one of the oldest houses surviving in Bozeman that remains in its original location. At the time of its construction, Bozeman was merely an 8-year-old hamlet, possessing little more than 168 residents and 65 wooden frame buildings. Struggling to survive, Bozeman was, as newspaper editor Horatio McGuire noted, far from the "centers of so-called refinement" and forming one of "the outposts of civilization."

But Bozeman's residents were committed to self-promotion and expansion. Buoyed up by the recent establishment of Yellowstone National Park and the promise of an increased federal presence in the area, locals commissioned a birds-eye view from the Pacific Rural Press, using the drawing to attract newcomers to the budding community. The depiction highlights that the McDonald House was one of only a few residences pushing beyond the confines of Main Street (formerly the Bozeman Trail) in 1872. And if one studies the 1872 birds-eye map closely, another significant fact about this interesting residence emerges — it is quite likely the first two-story residence in town.

Most significantly, the preservation of the Richard and Mary McDonald House — like so many of its counterparts — is justifiable because it helps us to remember the story of its original owners. Richard and Mary McDonald were not your typical pioneers. They were African American and former slaves, who made the overland journey to Montana Territory.

The story of the McDonald family is one of hardship and determination. While many freed slaves remained in the South after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, an adventuresome few fled what for them had been a war-torn land of racist oppression. Among them were the McDonalds.

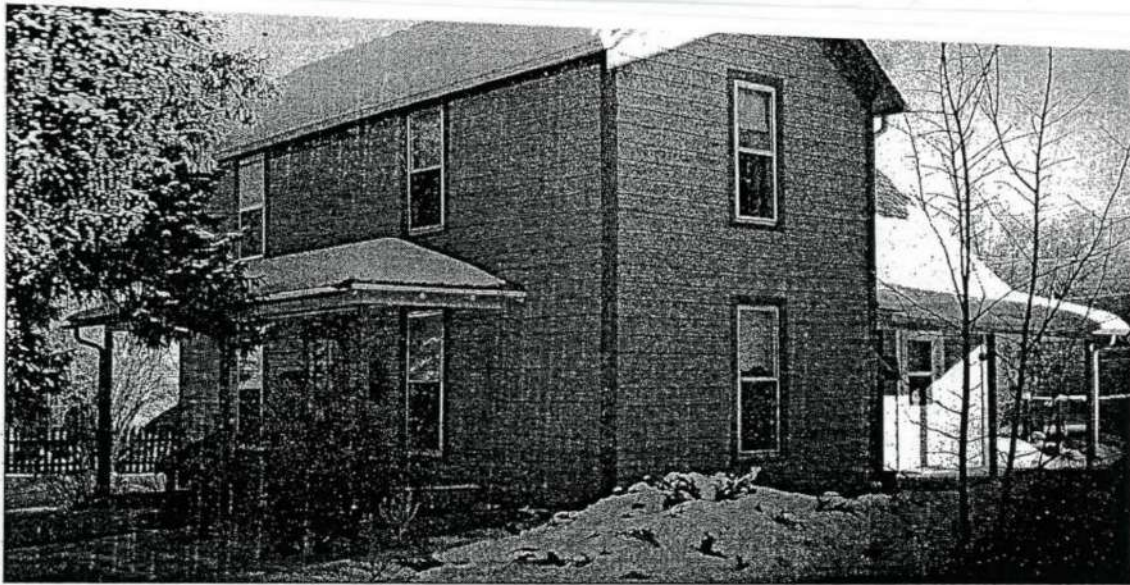
Born in 1833, Richard McDonald was nearing 30 when he hitched a team of six oxen to a wagon and began his long trek westward from Saint Joseph, Mo. His young wife, Mary Harris McDonald, a "little, short, heavy set woman, but always jolly," whom he had married just two years earlier, prepared too — gathering clothing, medicines, and sturdy useful items that could withstand the rough journey ahead. As quickly as possible, the McDonalds, together with their 6-month-old son, Robert, set out toward the promised land of the West.

Traveling in the company of the Dr. Harris Roberson family, and trailing a small herd of cattle behind them, the McDonalds soon encountered tragedy. Their infant son grew sick and died. He was buried beside the dusty Oregon Trail.

About four months after starting their journey, the McDonald-Roberson Party arrived in booming Virginia City, Mont., where prospectors had recently discovered one of the largest deposits of gold in the northern *continued*

**PRESERVATION**





The McDonald House at 308 S. Tracy Ave., was likely the first two-story home built in Bozeman.

Photography by B. Derek Strahn

## Strahn

Rocky Mountains. The McDonalds only stayed in Virginia City for a short time before relocating to Bozeman in 1864, the year the town was founded. The family soon filed a homestead claim on lands just a little south of Main Street.

In the years that followed, Richard McDonald worked as a freighter — a popular occupation in the years prior to the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Using the wagon and the hardy team of oxen that carried the McDonalds across the plains, he transported goods between Bozeman, Virginia City, Fort Benton and Helena. Mary worked as a homemaker, and soon other children arrived. Three sons — Lewis, Eddie and Arthur — all died before reaching adulthood, but three daughters — Mollie, Belle and Melissa — survived.

Following the death of her parents, Mollie McDonald and her daughter, Belle Fisher, lived in the family residence on South Tracy Avenue. “Built on the original homestead site,” the Bozeman Chronicle reported in 1964, “there is no doubt that the McDonald home is the oldest one in this community which still is occupied by the same family since it was built nearly a century ago.”

The McDonald House is a critical reminder that while it is important to commemorate those exceptional elements comprising our architectural past, it is equally important — and arguably more important — to remember those less impressive vestiges of

everyday life and everyday people. Like most who lived and died in Bozeman, the McDonald family left little to be remembered by — no accounts in history books, no large collection of diaries and letters bequeathed to local historical societies, not even a photograph. All that remains is a modest headstone in Sunset Hills Cemetery and a simple, well-preserved frame structure where they and their decedents lived.

This humble residence offers a rare glimpse of people and experiences that history lovers have too often overlooked in their attempt to identify and interpret the exceptional. If we let places like this trigger our memories and speak to us, each one can teach us a great deal about an otherwise forgotten past and the intriguing people who populated it. Their stories are worth remembering.

But the importance of preserving places like the McDonald House at 308 South Tracy goes well beyond the educational value inherent in such a process. In allowing us to better access the past experienced by the majority, and discover first hand the commonalities that we share with earlier generations, these less-exceptional places help us to see our connections with the past, and our own place in the flowing river of time.

*B. Derek Strahn is a historic preservation consultant and social studies teacher at Bozeman High. He can be reached at [DerekStrahn@msn.com](mailto:DerekStrahn@msn.com).*