

Richard 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 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

Sour Dough or may have bran. It is known that from the south present location Theater. Incumbent have also state evidence today ground stream of Tracy and C

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Mollie McDonald Gross



Grandmother McDonald

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."

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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



Melissa McDonald poses in this undated photograph.

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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 McDonald 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 obituary 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 invariably 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.

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."

Gail Schontzler can be reached at gails@daily-chronicle.com

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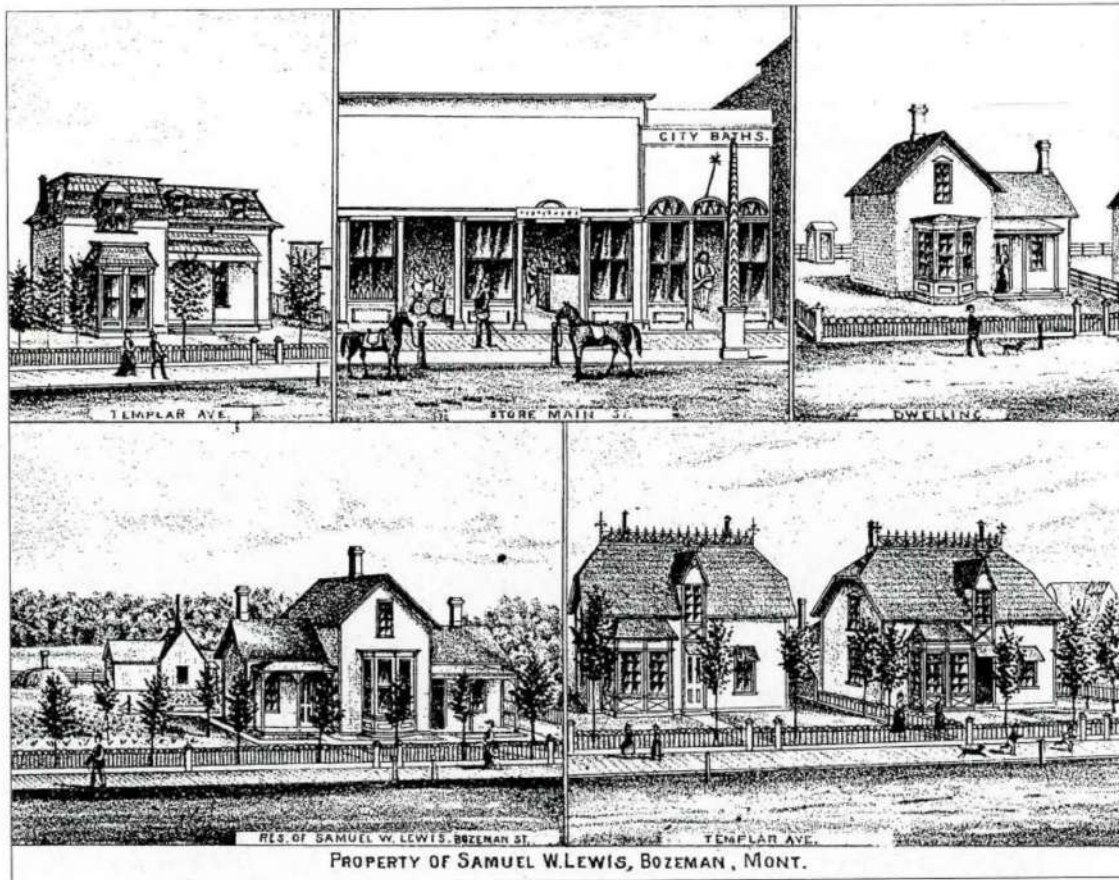
From: *Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley: a history*
by Phyllis Smith

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.⁴

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.

Avant Courier - Nov. 26, 1898

Death of Dick McDonald.

After a lingering illness of several weeks duration, Dick McDonald, the well-known colored man, passed away peacefully on Sunday morning last and was buried on Tuesday. He was a pioneer of Montana and Bozeman, generally known and well thought of by this entire community. His wife, Mary and three daughters, survive him, and although not in the most affluent circumstances, are fortunately in good health and able to earn their living.

Dick McDonald came to Montana in 1861 and to Bozeman in 1868, where he has ever since resided. His age was 65 years.

REGISTER

FULL NAME OF DECEDENT	DATE OF DEATH		OCCUPATION	AGE	TERM OF RESIDENCE	Birth place
	Month	Day Year				
Mc Mannus George	Feb	25 96	Farmer	27	not reported	u
Mc Donald Samiel	July	6 96	Laborer	27	not reported	6
Mc Reynolds Hallie	Mar	5 87	Child	6	6 yrs	6
Mc Alena Edward alias Edward Mc Veg	July	2 86	Laborer	48	—	u
Mc Master, infant of J. W. wife	Sept	2 87	infant	—	7 hours	u
Mc Hargue Geraldine	May	22 98	infant	2yrs	2 years	u
Mc Avoy Thomas	June	13 "	Retail Liquor Dealer	58	10 months	u
Mc Feron (Infant of Geo. Mc Feron)	Sept	25 "	Infant	10110	1 month	u
Mc Donald Richard	Nov	20 "	Laborer	66	29 years	7
Mc Allister Vera	Jan	5 00	Child	7	7 "	u
Mc Linn Fred	Apr.	24 "	Laborer	62	25 "	u
Male Chas. B.	Nov	14 "	Stockman	64	—	u
Mc Elross Sant	Mar	9 90	Child	2	—	u
Mc Pherson L D	May	10 "	Painter	45	20 years	u
Macalister Baby	Sept	6 90		2 1/2 yrs	—	u
Mc Donnell Baby	Oct	23 "		13 days	—	u
Mc Burn Vincent	Oct	23 "		36 days	—	u
Mc Ruzie Mrs	Nov	4 94	Housewife	72	—	u
Mc Cornick F. C.	May	9 90	R R Engineer	33	2 days	u
McLeod, John	Oct.	29 05	Farmer	87	—	u
Mc Donald, M C	Jan	15 06	—	22m	6 months	71
Mc Kinsey, Geo. E.	Apr.	13 06	—	83	—	u
Mc Allister, William	May	38 06	—	15	Two years	u
Mc M. the James	Oct.	18 06	Laborer	35-40	—	u

OF DEATHS.

MARRIED OR SINGLE	SEX	RACE OR COLOR	LAST PLACE OF RESIDENCE	CAUSE OF DEATH	REPORTED BY	
					NAME	OF
M.	M.	W	Bozeman Insult.	Consumption	H. W. Foster	9
single	m	W	Poor House	Contusion spine	S. L. Hogan	9
S.	F.	W	County	Meningitis	C. M. Chambliss	9
'	M.	W	Poor House	Bright Disease	S. L. Hogan	9
S.	F.	W	Bozeman 4 th ward	Heart trouble	H. W. Foster	9
'	F.	W	" 3 rd "	Scarlet Fever	J. M. Waters	9
'	M.	W	" 4 "	Acute Alcoholism	F. M. Higgins	9
'	F.	W	County	Enlargement Thyroid Gland	C. M. Chambliss	9
N	M	Black	Bozeman 3rd ward	Inanition	F. M. Higgins	
S.	F.	W.	Chesnut	Follicular Tonsillitis	Jos. Piedalme	
S.	M.	W.	Poor Farm	Bright Disease	L. E. Saffley	
P	M	W	-	Accident	H W Foster	
'	M	W	Bozeman	Pneumonia	" " "	
W	M	W	"	Typhoid Pneumonia	R M Whitford	
A	M	W	"	Cholera Inf	L E Saffley	
W	M	W	Gal Co	Delayed Cor	" " "	
Q	M	W	" "	Inanition	Jos Piedalme	
M	F	W	Bozeman	Tuberculosis	J F Blair	
T	M	W	"	R.R. Accident	J F Blair	
M.	W	W	Bozeman	Natural causes	C W Jump	Co
S.	F	W	Bozeman	Pneumonia	D. H. Patterson	
'	M	W	Sumner, Wash.	Senile Decay	J H Corbiss	9
-	M	W	Bozeman.	Dysphagia	J. E. Raymond	9
9	"	"	R. D.	"	"	

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

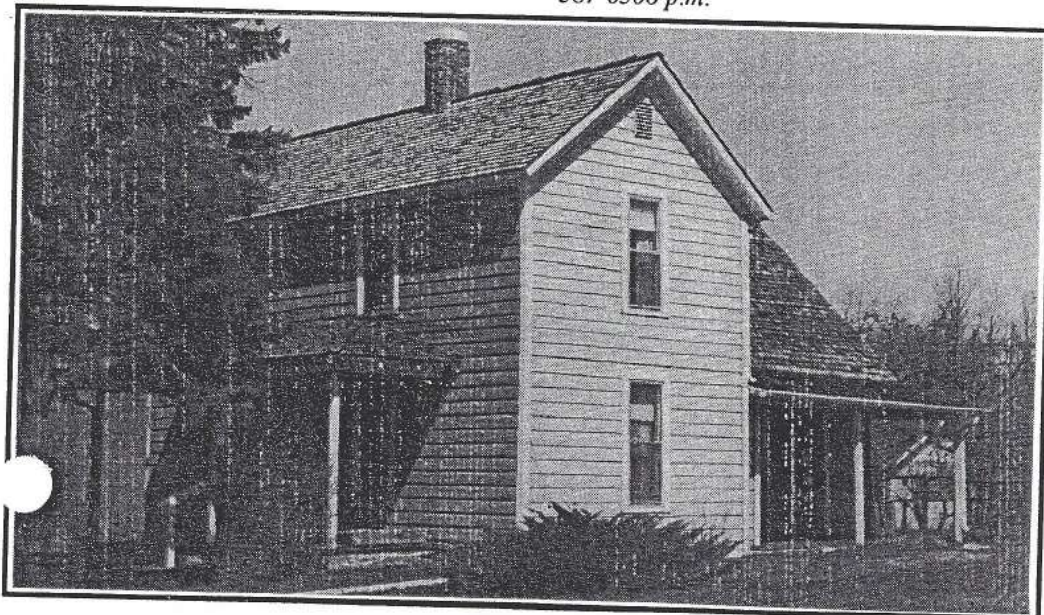
The McDonald house at 308 South Tracy, built to its present form in 1872, is one of the few residences remaining from Bozeman's earliest days. The oldest structure in Bozeman still occupied by descendants of its original builder, it has housed the McDonald family for over 120 years.

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 'airie' 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.

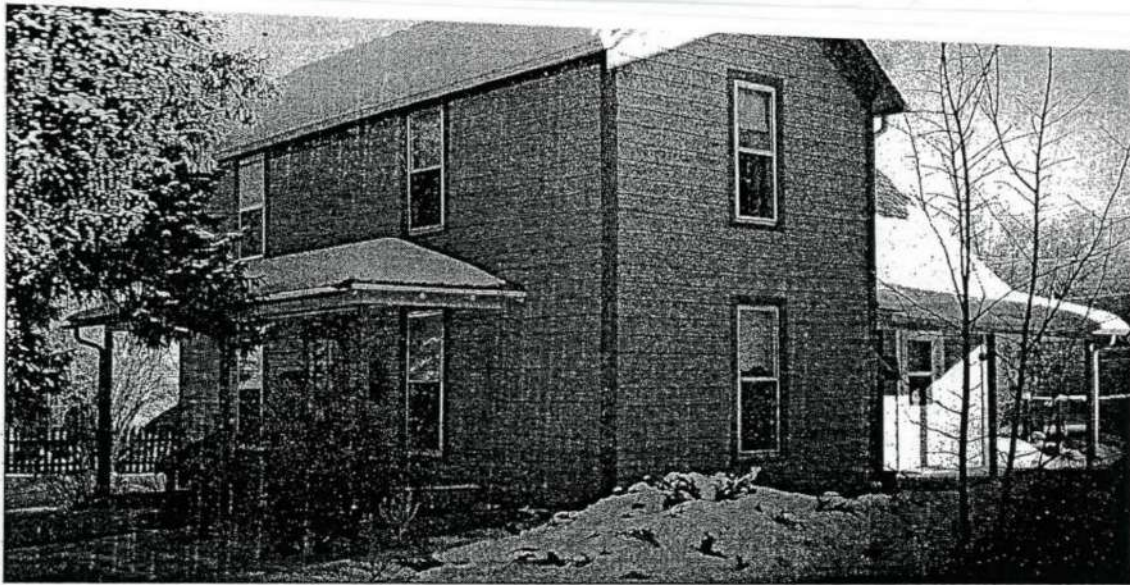
The story of the McDonald family is one of hardship and determination. While many freed slaves remained in the South after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, an adventuresome few fled what for them had been a war-torn land of racist oppression. Among them were the McDonalds.

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

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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.

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