

## **Irene Irby and the McDonough Family – Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission**

### **2021 Agricultural History Honoree**

The Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission would like to honor Irene Irby and the McDonough Family for their significant historical contributions to the Upper Gunnison Basin community and the livestock industry. Irene and the McDonough family have been directly involved in the production of livestock in the Gunnison basin since the late 1870's and the family's contributions to the success of the cattle industry and have been substantial. The HPC wants to recognize their contributions and express our appreciation.

Goldie Irene (McDonough) Irby's roots go back to her great grandfather John T. McDonough and her great grandmother Narcissa Jane Kesselring of Pennsylvania. John and Narcissa married in Iowa in 1867 and subsequently lost three children before crossing the great plains in 1872 with a wagon train. They located in Saguache where Mr. McDonough engaged in the blacksmith business. In 1879 they moved to Powderhorn and took up ranching. They had only been there three years when Mr. McDonough purchased the old Indian Agency buildings at Los Pinos and made that their permanent home.

The Los Pinos Indian Agency was originally established in 1868. After the last of the Ute Indians vacated the premises and were moved to the Uncompahgre Valley in 1879, the federal government auctioned off the remaining buildings and equipment. Although the general understanding is that the Utes were moved to the Montrose area in 1875, reports to the U.S. Congress show that the Agency was still occupied by hundreds of members of the Tabeguache Ute tribe as late as 1878. John McDonough came to acquire the John Johnson ranch and old agency buildings in 1881. Irene's great granddad used the blacksmith shop on the reservation and established a thriving horse business and was a personal friend of Chief Ouray. The family was known as one of the most prosperous and progressive in the country.

John McDonough and Narcissa had a total of nine children, four of whom died in infancy. John was an early member of the local Cattleman's Association and raised horses, cattle and hay. The original family home was lost to a fire before Irene was born, and all of the original reservation buildings except the blacksmith shop were lost as well. The family patriarch died in 1906 and Narcissa Jane McDonough passed away in 1919. Here is an excerpt from her obituary in the Saguache Crescent:

*For over a quarter of a century we have known Mrs. McDonough personally and are deeply grieved at her death. She was of the pioneers who did so much to shape the west as it now is. But this is always this to be said: Their work was well done and Mrs. McDonough has now entered into her reward. —Gunnison Empire. Saguache Crescent, March 20, 1919*

Irene's grandfather, William C. McDonough, was one of John and Narcissa's five surviving children. Unfortunately William died after contracting a fatal case of pneumonia in January of

1927, when Irene's father Parker (Park) was just 22 years of age. Goldie (Irene) was born in 1935 to Park and his wife Goldie. Irene grew up on the McDonough family ranch, and helped with the haying, working cattle, cooking and all the work that was needed to keep the ranch going. For fun the kids would fish, ice skate and listen to the radio – especially the soap operas. The family traveled to Powderhorn to attend dances and play baseball. A windmill provided electricity, and a party line connected them to town, but it was put in for the Forest Service so everyone on the line could listen in. Irene's dad, Park, was known far and wide as an innovator and even patented the Gunnison Cattle Chute which ranchers all over the west found to be an essential piece of equipment for their operations. Park recognized the need for water storage on the Upper Cochetopa and pursued construction of the McDonough Reservoir on Los Pinos Creek. He worked hard on the dam construction, and after hiring an engineer to design the dam he physically built the dam with a D-9 Caterpillar Dozer. After three long years the reservoir was completed and began to store water in 1953.

When Irene was 19 she married Charles (Bob) Irby of Iola (now inundated by Blue Mesa Reservoir) and relocated to the Upper Tomichi and kept on ranching. She had some family close by, her Aunt Bessie McDonough Beals taught at the nearby Crookston Schoolhouse. Crookston had developed into a significant stage and rail stop between Sargents and Gunnison and timber and cattle were shipped out by the ton to market. The remains of the Crookston Schoolhouse are still visible, but the town of Crookston stopped being a mailstop and shipping location after the railroad tracks were pulled up in the 1950's. Irene and Bob were active in the local cattle production organizations (Gunnison County Cattlewomen and the Gunnison County Stockgrowers) and had many friends and neighbors. Community dances and parties were the norm at the Doyleville Schoolhouse and Irene became close friends with the ranch women from Parlin, Doyleville and Ohio City.

Irene and Bob's children and grandchildren are proudly continuing the ranching tradition along with their families. The Irby's continue to produce high value native grass hay, and follow the patterns of raising stock at high altitude. Irene stays involved in the family business and has lost none of the twinkle in her eye, strong backbone, and kind heart that has sustained her through market challenges, drought, flood, blizzards and social changes. Thank you Irene for all you and your family have done for agriculture in our valley. We honor and respect the contributions that you have made to our community and to the livestock industry.