

Creating an Irrigator's Reclamation Service: I. D. O'Donnell, Civic Capitalism, and the U. S. Reclamation Service in the Yellowstone Valley, 1900-1930

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The capitalist transformation of rural America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a central issue in American history. The economic development of the Yellowstone Valley of the northern plains between 1880 and 1920 mirrors the wider American experience in its intersection of governmental policy, the decisions of major corporate interests and international bankers, and the actions of local leaders. Throughout the Yellowstone, the passage of the Newlands Reclamation Act in 1902 and the creation of the United States Reclamation Service (USRS) encouraged local interests to think of their communities and their futures in new ways. Twenty years of agriculture in the valley was proof enough that farmers could not tame the region's demanding environment, but they could replace nature with massive engineering works that they could control. Although privately funded ventures had started the valley's irrigation, key civic capitalists in the Yellowstone were eager to exchange private development for federal funds and expertise to build a physical infrastructure for modern, market-driven farming. This exchange, however, was not a simple top-down reordering of the landscape and local economic priorities as dictated by federal policy. Rather, the goals and needs of local interests shaped the reclamation projects of the Yellowstone from the beginning, and the interaction between federal policy and local interests eventually led to basic change—a heightened regard for both irrigation and the individual farmer--in the United States Reclamation Service itself.

The central figure in the Yellowstone's search to build an irrigated empire, and a central figure in the history of the irrigation in the U. S. Reclamation Service, is I. D. O'Donnell of Billings, the service's first Supervisor of Irrigation. The USRS's thirteenth annual report announced O'Donnell's appointment and praised his contributions. The report's authors noted:

The underlying thought which prompted the creation of this office and the appointment of Mr. O'Donnell as the first incumbent was that there should be in the field, connected with the service, a practical business farmer, who could look at questions involved in the operation and management of the projects from the standpoint of the water user as well as from that of the service; who could advise the other officers of the service on all matters having to do with the efficient operation of the projects, and assist the water users on all matters coming under the general head of "better farming" methods. (1)

For the rest of the decade O'Donnell would push the interests of irrigators, and "practical" farmers before local, regional, and national forums, culminating in the 1918 publication of his treatise *Better Business, Better Farming, Better Living: Hints from a Practical Farmer to the settlers on the projects of the United States Reclamation Service* by the Reclamation Service. Although recognized today as "the father of irrigation in Montana," he is a neglected, largely forgotten figure within the history of the Reclamation Service and the later Reclamation Bureau, even though he continued to preach his vision of an irrigated West into the 1930s.

O'Donnell came to the west as a cowboy, not an irrigator. Ignatius Donnelly "Bud" O'Donnell was born in Ontario, Canada, on September 19, 1860; he was the second child of second-generation Irish immigrants, Daniel and Margaret McIntosh

O'Donnell. His family moved in 1864 to Michigan where his father worked in the timber industry for several years before buying his own farm in Midland County, Michigan.

Young Bud O'Donnell worked the farm and attended school in Saginaw, Michigan, until his early teen years, when he took up full-time work in the local timber business. He continued working in Michigan until he was twenty-one years old and he left with a friend for work in Chicago. Jobs were lacking there, however, and the lure of the west proved irresistible. O'Donnell took a Northern Pacific Railroad train to Dakota and Montana, where he looked for construction work. (2)

O'Donnell's first stop in Montana was at Miles City, where the Tongue River joins the Yellowstone River. A natural with an axe, he took a job cutting ties for the railroad, which was then streaking westward towards the Rockies. With that grubstake in hand, O'Donnell left for the gold and silver mines at Maiden, to the north of the Yellowstone. Quick riches proved beyond his reach, and once his grubstake was gone, O'Donnell was on the move again, and accepted his first cowboy job—putting up hay for a federal government contractor. He efficiently built corrals, stables, and fences and his experience qualified him for the next job—being a cowboy at the I J Ranch, a stock-raising enterprise owned and operated by a bunch of rich kids from back East—including Parmly Billings and Edward Bailey, the son and nephew, respectively, of railroad capitalist Frederick Billings, a former president of the Northern Pacific Railroad and the largest private landowner in the newly established Yellowstone County. (3)

O'Donnell proved to be the right man, in the right place, at the right time. Frederick Billings had long been interested in agricultural reform, and in making his sizeable interests along the Northern Pacific line, especially in Yellowstone County,

highly profitable. While Northern Pacific president, he had encouraged the creation of the Cass-Cheney demonstration farm, which popularized the “bonanza farm” boom of the late 1870s and swelled land sales in Dakota Territory. He operated his own farm in Vermont as a demonstration farm, especially one that touted the value of hybrid seeds, purebred livestock, conservation, and diversification. But in Montana Territory his son and nephew soon tired of the hard work of ranch life, and Frederick Billings had a problem of his own in the city of Billings where his agent, Congregational minister Benjamin F. Stuart, had proven to be unreliable. In 1885 the elder Billings rearranged his business ventures in the Yellowstone Valley. He ordered his son and nephew to move to Billings, where they took over management of the family’s land and development company, the Minnesota and Montana Land and Improvement Company, and established a private bank, the Bailey and Billings Bank. Frederick Billings then placed his various agricultural interests under the supervision of O’Donnell, who was placed in charge of the I J Ranch, along with other valley ranch land, and Reverend Stuart, who moved to his own ranch along Canyon Creek and the land company’s “Big Ditch” irrigation system, east of Billings adjacent to large parcel of Billings family land, where he started the famed Hesper Farm. Stuart too followed the lead of his patron, Frederick Billings, and operated Hesper Farm as a model agricultural landscape, with irrigated fields, diverse crops, and modern soil conservation techniques. (4)

O’Donnell made the most of his opportunity to impress his patrons and after Parmly Billings’s death in 1886, Edward Bailey sold O’Donnell the agricultural interests owned by Parmly Billings and they became partners. By 1890 Bailey and O’Donnell was a well established livestock firm; as O’Donnell later recalled, “we fed a number of bands of sheep, took up various land holdings, and kept a quantity of range. It was

through these experiments that I caught a glimpse of a great future for farming in the Yellowstone Valley.” Since the Billings family trusted his management instincts, and O’Donnell had already proved to be a quick study, the family named him as manager of the Minnesota and Montana Land and Improvement Company. By default, he became an irrigator since the land company had established and operated the “Big Ditch,” the largest private irrigation effort in the region, since 1883. (5)

For a cowboy, O’Donnell took to irrigation quickly, and by decade’s end, he was considered one of the region’s irrigation experts. He helped to establish the Montana Irrigation Society and served as its president. O’Donnell became an aggressive spokesman for northern plains irrigation. In the 1894 national publication, *The Irrigation Age*, O’Donnell bragged about the potential of the Yellowstone Valley’s Clark Fork Bottom (where his Hesper Farm was located), predicting that due to irrigation the land was “destined to be the great feeding center of this section of the country.” He improved and expanded the works of the “Big Ditch” and improved the land company’s image and reputation among the farmers who relied on it. In 1892 he and Bailey purchased the Hesper Farm for \$10,000 and O’Donnell began his own experiments with irrigation, with a special concern about what crops would grow most efficiently. The Billings *Gazette* Illustrated Edition of July 1894 approvingly commented that O’Donnell “enlists science to his aid in farming, irrigation and stock ranching, with the best results.” Also in 1892, O’Donnell founded the Yellowstone Fair Association, where he began an annual ritual of promoting irrigation, scientific agriculture, and the cultivation of alfalfa and sugar beets, which he had successfully cultivated at Hesper Farm. (6)

O'Donnell is credited with producing the Yellowstone's first successful sugar beet crop and the first alfalfa crop in Montana. Both products, however, needed more water than other crops typically cultivated in the northern plains—a fact that also drove O'Donnell to support irrigation development. In 1893-1894 he began to serve as a lecturer for the Farmers' Institutes, sponsored by the Experiment Station of Montana State University, with alfalfa and irrigation being his favorite topics. O'Donnell also established new local irrigation ventures; the High Line Ditch Company, capitalized at \$10,000, came in 1895 and five years later he joined with Preston Moss and others to create the Big Ditch Company, capitalized at \$64,000. In 1898 he applied for a patent for his own improved headgate design. He served as a Montana delegate to various regional and national irrigation congresses; a meeting in Cheyenne, Wyoming, he recalled, was where "I gave my maiden address in the interest of an [federal] irrigation law" several years prior to the passage of the Newlands Reclamation Act. (7)

By the end of the nineteenth century, O'Donnell had proven sugar beets could withstand the harsh Montana climate—and that a Montana beet was higher in sugar content than those from other sections of the country. He had patched together a network of fellow irrigators across the region; and he had improved the efficiency of the Big Ditch as a water provider. He was ready to launch his holdings, and those of many other Yellowstone farmers, into a new agricultural age, one based on irrigation and the production of sugar beets. As horticultural expert S. M. Emery, the director of the Montana State Experiment Station, predicted to O'Donnell in April 1900: "The time is surely coming when Montana will produce its own sugar. You have all the conditions down there to make such a plant a success." (8)

To make that success, O'Donnell needed help from a variety of quarters. First, he needed new partners. The Billings family and Edward Bailey had bankrolled his ventures for over ten years, but with the new century on the horizon, the Billingses and Bailey had both tired of their western adventure. They were willing to sell the land company to O'Donnell, if he could find the partners. O'Donnell formed an alliance with the president of the First National Bank in Billings, Preston Moss, and together they bought out the Billings and Bailey interests. Moss and O'Donnell, soon joined by engineer Henry W. Rowley, became powerful business partners, and good friends. (In the early 1900s they all built architecturally distinctive homes next to each other in a new trendy neighborhood of Billings.) Moss was a native of Missouri, who moved to Billings in 1892 to be the vice-president of the First National Bank. Four years later he became the bank's president and invested in new Billings enterprises and agricultural projects in the Yellowstone Valley. He also owned a local telephone company, the Northern Hotel, the Gazette Printing Company, and the Billings Utility Company. Trained in civil engineering at the University of Minnesota, Rowley had been the original engineer of the Big Ditch and a Billings resident since 1882. He too brought money (gained from real estate investments and the Billings Water Power Company) to the partnership, along with experience with building large irrigation systems from scratch, something that O'Donnell had never done. (9)

The importance of the O'Donnell-Moss-Rowley alliance should not be underestimated; all three were classic examples of what historian John Cumbler has called "civic capitalists," who sought their "own profit, but each understood that his welfare was bound up with the welfare of others of his kind and the city that nourished them." The first major venture of these three civic capitalists was the Billings Land and Irrigation

Company. They also jointly ventured into banking, commercial, and manufacturing enterprises while demonstrating their civic duty through support of such institutions as the new Parmly Billings Library. Due to his prior career within the Billings family's business circles, O'Donnell perhaps understood better than the others the need for reciprocal arrangements to nurture the fragile economy and settlements of the northern plains. As argued by an editorial in the *Billings Gazette*, after his appointment to the Reclamation Service in December 1913, "In Billings, there are many men, who are really doing things, who have the right mental attitude. They make up the predominating influence of society, they lead, and the result is that the right mental attitude, the spirit, the loyalty of the Billings citizen has become proverbial throughout the land." The "Doctor of Mental Attitude," concluded the editorial writer, was "I. D. O'Donnell." A later contemporary account of O'Donnell's career, published in 1919 after his years with the Reclamation Service, noted that O'Donnell "is the city's principal booster and has had more to do with organizing and getting new businesses started than almost any other man there." And a 1923 story praising O'Donnell in the *Great Falls Tribune* concluded that "in Billings whenever money is needed to build an addition to the public library or money is needed for something of historical importance [or] the help is needed of some public spirited citizen, the community instinctively turns to Mr. O'Donnell." (10)

To build a Yellowstone empire, O'Donnell needed more than strong local allies. He also needed, at least, federal recognition of the potential of an irrigated Yellowstone, if not federal support and money for Yellowstone irrigation. Through his office as president of the Montana Irrigation Society, and by attending various irrigation conferences, he had connected with various federal officials then exploring the

possibility of new irrigation programs for the arid West. In particular, he assisted and supported the efforts of Elmwood Mead to promote irrigation within the Department of Agriculture. He had met Mead at an 1897 irrigation conference, a key meeting that encouraged Congress to establish a division of Irrigation Investigations with the Agriculture department's Office of Experiment Stations in 1898. Under this program, Samuel Fortier and Elmwood Mead came to the Yellowstone in 1900 and investigated the Big Ditch, while interviewing O'Donnell at Hesper Farm. In their follow-up report, Fortier and Mead acknowledged the assistance of O'Donnell, approvingly noted the 10,000 acres of alfalfa currently in the irrigated Yellowstone, and discussed how O'Donnell paid for Mead to install a weir at Hesper Farm in order to measure the water flow. (11)

Federal recognition, strong local allies, and a marketable crop were all important, but most importantly, O'Donnell needed more land than what the scattered holdings of the old Minnesota and Montana Land and Improvement Company provided. To acquire the needed land at the lowest possible cost, O'Donnell and Moss initially turned to the Carey Act of 1894, which granted free federal land to states for major irrigation projects. In 1903, a group of Washington state investors arrived in Billings to investigate the possibility of establishing an irrigation project on the Billings Bench northeast of the city. O'Donnell toured the capitalists around the city and county, convincing them that indeed the Yellowstone was the right place for such a project. In mid-October 1903, John Schram and W. T. Clark of Washington state, in partnership with Preston Moss, I. D. O'Donnell, and Henry Rowley, incorporated the Billings Land & Irrigation Company. The Washington investors put up \$75,000, which was matched by a \$50,000 loan from Moss and his First National Bank and \$12,500 each from Rowley and M. A. Arnold, the

cashier at Moss's bank. By 1905, the construction of the irrigation system was largely complete, cultivation was underway, and in April 1905 the company received its first land deeds from state officials who administered the Carey Land Act board. The project eventually irrigated over 24,000 acres. (12)

O'Donnell and Moss, however, did not plan to stop with Carey Act largesse—Bud O'Donnell had argued for a more comprehensive federal reclamation law for several years, and when the Newlands Reclamation Act became a reality in 1902, he immediately began to look for a suitable Yellowstone project. He located a perfect site: 35,000 acres of “open” land south of the Yellowstone River, bordered by the Big Horn River Valley, and serviced by the rails of the Northern Pacific Railway (NP) and the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy (CBQ or Burlington Route). There was one hitch—and in the West of those days it was viewed as a hindrance more than an obstacle—the preferred land was on the Crow Indian Reservation.

CBQ officials had pushed their railroad through the Crow reservation in the mid-1890s, where the line linked with the Northern Pacific, and spurred growth in the Yellowstone Valley. That cession had proven easy enough to negotiate, but the railroad merely passed through the reservation and could do little to develop local traffic along the line. After railroad magnate James J. Hill, international financier J. P. Morgan and others combined the interests of the Burlington Route with those of the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern Railway at the turn of the century, the new Hill-Morgan empire became even more interested in cracking open the Crow reservation to settlement. The railroads strongly supported the reclamation project, and for more reasons than mere traffic on the line. In 1900, a worried Montana Senator T. H. Carter warned James J. Hill: “This state will be dominated by a mob until the reclamation of the arid lands

transfers the balance of power of the farmers.” Hill, in particular, wished to boost agricultural production for both political and economic reasons, and his correspondents in 1902-1903 periodically informed him of developments in Montana. (13)

In April 1904, Congress approved a bill to amend current agreements with the Crow Indians to permit the withdrawal of land from the reservation to be used for the reclamation project in exchange for \$1.15 million dollars. The Crows already living in the ceded area had a choice: stay or accept compensation for their improvements and leave. Only three Crow settlers stayed. Engineers from the U. S. Reclamation Service soon surveyed the ceded land, and in May Assistant Chief Reclamation Engineer Arthur P. Davis came to Billings, where he met with X. H. Fitch, Supervising Engineer, and Robert Stockman, Engineer of Billings, to assess the engineers’s findings. Davis ruled that the preliminary surveys were promising enough to justify the creation of a reclamation project and he ordered more intensive survey work under Stockton’s supervision. (14)

Billings interests carefully monitored the work of the federal engineers; Moss and O’Donnell began their plans for creating a sugar beet refinery in earnest. On February 26, 1905, the USRS’s Board of Engineers ratified the feasibility of the project--all that was needed now was an official authorization from the Secretary of Interior. The approval of the engineering board was enough for Moss, O’Donnell, and Rowley. Less than three weeks later, on March 14, 1905, the three allies, together with M. A. Arnold and F. W. Shaw incorporated the Billings Sugar Factory, with a capitalization of \$750,000. Moss put up \$650,000 while O’Donnell, Rowley, Arnold and Shaw pitched in with \$25,000 each. After Secretary of Interior E. A. Hitchcock signed off on the construction of the \$900,000 Huntley Project (so named after an early settlement in the

project area) on April 18, 1905, the creation of an expanded irrigated Yellowstone empire was formally underway. In May the Billings group signed a contract with the newly created Great Western Sugar Company (incorporated in New Jersey in January 1905) to provide sugar refined from Yellowstone-grown sugar beets. O'Donnell and his allies had used their own moxie, engineering expertise, boosterism, irrigation experience, federal land, and federal dollars to establish a potential powerful economic engine of change, where federal support made private enterprise possible. Billings now had its first truly large locally owned and operated industry, which depended totally on the success of irrigation and sugar beet cultivation.(15)

In 1906 the sugar company signed contracts with local farmers for seven thousand acres of beets. When the building of the Billings Sugar Factory—with a capacity of converting 55,000 tons of beets into 161,000 bags of sugar—an new age of reciprocal agricultural-industrial partnership was underway. The completion of the Huntley Project did not come as quickly as local interests had wished, although from the perspective of USRS engineers, the project had the sort of delays common to the service's initial projects. Local historian William Hancock observed: "They all had problems common to construction today including wages, strikes, delays in the delivery of materials, adverse weather, flooding conditions and soil and drainage problems not contemplated. Horses and men were hard to find. One contractor shipped in two carloads of horses from Iowa and inexperienced Indian labor was often used." On May 21, 1907, progress had proceeded to the point that President Theodore Roosevelt officially declared the Huntley Project acreage open for settlement, a total of 28,921 acres, enough for 585 farms between 40 and 160 acres in size. The remaining project acreage had too high of an alkali content, and the USRS only allowed settlement if prospective settlers knew

they were claiming land of dubious value. To serve as trade centers for the Huntley settlers, the Reclamation Service also platted towns, such as Huntley, Ballantine, Worden, Osborn, and Pompeys Pillar, and opened lots for sale in August 1907. (16)

That most of the Huntley Project properties were small—40 or so acres in size—reflected a shared assumption by both O'Donnell and F. B. Linfield, director of the Montana Experiment Station and later dean of the College of Agriculture at Montana State University. Small acreage forced farmers to cultivate thoroughly and carefully as well as showing restraint in using the all-too-valuable supply of water. It also called for some diversification: small garden plots to provide food could exist adjacent to the sugar beet fields (indeed the small plots were a convenient way to force farmers to rely on sugar beets for their primary cash crop). Small lots also meant more settlers—and increasing the population was always a goal of O'Donnell and other like-minded investors in Yellowstone County. (17)

Forty-acre farms, however, did not please other Billings residents. The publisher of the *Billings Gazette*, E. H. Becker, pointedly referred to O'Donnell when he complained that the 40-acre tract reflected “a pet hobby of the reclamation service, backed by a very small minority of those who call themselves experienced farmers in irrigated districts.” Becker insisted that there was “no demand in eastern Montana for 700 40-acre tract farmers at the very doors of this city.” Admitting that the goal of the project was to produce sugar beets for the local factory, Becker pointed out that the “lands under the Huntley ditch along, if intensely cultivated, would supply a sufficient number of beets to supply the demand of four factories,” but there were no other factories on the horizon. To “protect the best interests of the settlers, but the best

interests of the community commercially as well,” he urged local residents to demand that the federal government grant larger farms. (18)

Becker’s comments reflected the concerns of the region’s large stockgrowing interests—some of whom had been grazing on Crow land for years—as well as the interests of real estate speculators who wanted to grab as much of the cheap irrigated land as possible when it became available. When the Huntley lands were made available to settlers, most registrants were merely interested in seeing how high a number they would draw in order to select the best available land. 5,491 individuals registered for the first 582 farms, but of the first 1,000 names drawn, a mere 76 completed filing and claimed a farm. (19)

Those who were serious about settling at Huntley soon discovered that while water had been diverted into the system, it was only for the priming and puddling of the canals, laterals, and structures. It would be months—April 6, 1908—before water was actually delivered to the farms. Then the Reclamation Service did little, in the farmers’s eyes, to help the settlers. Since the irrigation system only delivered water to the high point of the farm unit, farmers had to build their own ditches, and most knew nothing about irrigation technology or even when and how to irrigate their fields to best advantage. Alex Kimonth, who lived near Ballantine, recalled his problems that first summer of water in July 1908:

After a lot of hard work correcting mistakes made by ourselves and, also, by the government in placing ditches in the wrong place, we ordered water. Having never done any irrigating, we had a hard time to get the water in the places where it did any good. . . . Our ditches were too small and we had to build them

larger. By the time we had worn out two shovels, we got the ditches so that they could carry water.

The first year of cultivation at Huntley was generally a bust. While fields were planted by April, grains were largely produced, and yields were disappointing. Sugar beets would have to wait until the 1909 season. (20)

The delays and controversies of 1907-1908 troubled O'Donnell. The Reclamation Service had built the irrigation machine he always wanted for the Yellowstone, but now it seemed the machine did not immediately produce the garden that he and his allies envisioned. True to his personality, however, O'Donnell aggressively sought solutions. In 1907 he moved to shore up support for the project within the Billings business community by leading the transformation of the city's old Commercial Club into the Billings Chamber of Commerce, with himself as President. The chamber strongly supported the sugar factory and beet farming in its early publicity. (21)

O'Donnell also joined with others to establish a new educational institution to further the cultural process of turning cowboys into farmers. As early as 1904 Billings merchants John Losekamp and Christian Yegen had joined forces with educators Ernest T. Eaton and Lewis Eaton to establish a private high school, which operated out of various downtown buildings for its first four years. In late July, 1908, the school was reorganized as the Billings Polytechnic Institute, with five individuals providing the vast majority of its capital: Losekamp and Yegen with \$10,000 each, and O'Donnell, Preston B. Moss, and Henry W. Rowley with \$5,000 each. The latter three also helped to provide the location for a new 60-acre campus, north of town along the Big Ditch. The announced educational goal of the Billings Polytechnic was "industrial and

technical education. It is now realized that hand training is mind training and that the young man or woman who is not trained to do something and to do that something well, has not been half educated.” The new school would have machine shops, home economics classes, and (not surprisingly) a demonstration farm where about 40 acres “will be put into crops under the direction of an expert in intensified farming.”(22)

Another goal of the institute was to transform cowboys into farmers by replacing the region’s early dependency on stockgrowing with industrial and agricultural ventures. This theme became predominant in 1911 as the institute’s founders approached railroad magnate James J. Hill to donate 100 acres to the school. Hill’s Great Northern Railway had operated a small dryland farming demonstration next to the school’s 40 acres of irrigated land in 1909. School officials promised that with Hill’s donation these efforts would be magnified into a “Model A” demonstration farm. “To bring about a solution to the agricultural problem here,” a 1911 memorandum to Hill explained, “the Institute would conduct a series of model demonstration farms. These farms would be placed under average condition and on an entirely practical basis. It would have them so arranged that the farmers could come and study the methods for themselves. Not experiment but demonstration would be the work of these farms.” This mailing to Hill included mock “before and after” photographs, with one showing three boys in cowboy hats and chaps, labeled as before, and the after photograph showed the same boys in farmer clothing and caps, with a big stack of sugar beets in front of them, as happy, healthy farmers. (23)

Also in 1908 O’Donnell directly helped the Huntley Project settlers by bankrolling its first experiment station, so the farmers could learn proper irrigation and cultivation techniques. In the summer of 1907 USRS engineers stationed at Huntley understood

that many of the settlers who claimed units needed help. They contacted the Montana Agricultural Experiment Station and asked state officials to create a demonstration program for the project. When in 1908 the state refused to step forward—budgets were tight already and the experiment station was actively promoting dryland farming—USRS Supervising Engineer H. N. Savage asked O'Donnell to help immediately before the growing season was over. "I know it would profit the settlers very much to have this demonstration farm operated by you," claimed Savage, "in order that they might have the benefit of your experience and example, and also opportunity to consult with you about the crops growing under your management and their own within the project." Savage could offer O'Donnell little in return for his assistance. He promised to supply a "suitable" barn, a couple of small residences, four horses, a wagon, plow, disk harrow, tooth harrow, and plank smoother, and about 45 acres, of which the Reclamation Service only wanted five acres planted in sugar beets and a "few" acres in alfalfa. O'Donnell would be liable for everything else, including "all the running expenses and furnish the labor and seed." (24)

O'Donnell had too much tied to the future of the Huntley Project to say no; he accepted the arrangement and the Huntley Project Demonstration Farm became a reality. In 1910 O'Donnell's control passed to a partnership of the USRS, the U. S. Department of Agriculture, and the Montana State Experiment Station. The property was expanded to 300 acres and renamed the Huntley Project Experiment Station. Over the next decades, especially during the administration of Dan Hansen, who was superintendent between 1910 and 1949, the various programs at the demonstration farm proved of great benefit to the settlers. By 1910-1911, sugar beets had finally become a dominant crop, with approximately 4,000 acres planted, and even railroad promotional brochures

were passing on the O'Donnell doctrine of intensive agriculture to prospective settlers. "After beets have been grown for three years," a Northern Pacific Railway pamphlet recommended, "some other crop should be planted, and a proper rotation of grain, alfalfa, and sugar beets will retain the fertility of the soil and make maximum yields possible." (25)

The early difficulties at Huntley opened O'Donnell's eyes, and purse strings, to the possibility of dry farming as a complementary method of cultivating the vast benchlands of eastern Montana. In 1909 Billings was the host city to the Fourth Dry Farming Congress and International Dry Farming Exposition. Preston W. Moss was the local chair, and I. D. O'Donnell was the treasurer. Dry farming was all the rage in Montana in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and incessant boosting of dry farming encouraged hundreds of thousands of settlers to come to the state and try their luck. O'Donnell and Moss were never vocal dry farming proponents, but they accepted that dry farming, in addition to the irrigated lands of the Yellowstone Valley, could open up a potential 2.5 million acres "directly tributary" to Billings. Moreover, supporting the congress would be good for local business, and their various other local ventures. For example, the conference was a perfect way to boost the Huntley Project (a tour was planned), the Billings Sugar Company (a photograph was included in the conference book), and Moss's Northern Hotel, where the important national and international delegates and officials would stay. Since the Great Northern's James J. Hill was going to give one of the congress's major addresses, Moss also would have an opportunity to discuss with Hill his development plans for "Mossmain," a planned community that never really developed, located near the new railroad yards at Laurel in Yellowstone County. Their involvement in the successful dry farming congress is an excellent

example of the civic capitalism of Moss and O'Donnell in these crucial decades of expansion in Yellowstone County. (26)

The early years at Huntley showed O'Donnell both the potential and the problems inherent in the initial USRS irrigation projects. He was not alone in realizing that while the projects were impressive engineering feats, mere engineering alone would not transform the arid West into an agricultural garden. In fact, as more of the initial projects went into operation, criticism of the Reclamation Service grew among the settlers and adjacent local leaders who had hoped to substantially benefit from the federal largesse. The criticism had grown to a storm of protest by the time of the administration of President Woodrow Wilson took office in March 1913. A series of conferences took place in Washington in 1913-1914, and Congress took action to amend the payment schedule for settlers while the USRS itself looked to internal reforms. In its thirteenth annual report, the Reclamation service reminded readers (and quite likely its own staff) that "home making" was its primary goal: "increasing the number of farm homes and extending the area of productive lands in the United States are the objects of the work of the Reclamation Service. The USRS then admitted "that in order that the greatest possible good may be realized from the efforts of the Government and the irrigators, it is necessary that the irrigators appreciate the efforts of the United States to further their interests and that officials responsible for the administration of the irrigation projects fully understand the needs of the irrigators." (27)

In late 1913 Secretary of Interior Franklin K. Lane addressed the problem aggressively by appointing a Reclamation Commission, a five-member panel headed by USRS Director F. H. Newell and including I. D. O'Donnell in a new position, titled Supervisor of Irrigation. Bud O'Donnell now had an opportunity to do on a national stage what he had

been doing in the Yellowstone Valley for twenty years—promote reciprocal partnerships between farmers, agricultural experts, and irrigation specialists; teach farmers the value of scientific agriculture; and demonstrate how to best use irrigation technology to cultivate individual crops. (28)

From all accounts, he entered his new career with missionary zeal. “Numerous meetings have been held with the farmers and the officials of the water users’ associations for the purpose of discussing on the ground questions of interest to the water users, stress being laid upon the improvement of farming methods,” reported the Reclamation Service. He became a regular contributor to the agency’s official magazine, *The Reclamation Record*, where published versions of his favorite lecture topics appeared. His family kept news stories about his appointment and travels across the irrigation systems of the west in a large scrapbook. The local Montana press carefully reported his various trips and his frequent proclamations. In its 1914 anniversary edition, the *Billings Gazette* published O’Donnell’s overview of his first months in office, ending with a message that he constantly repeated over the next four years:

To view as a whole the magnificent constructive work of the government irrigation plan is to forget the small and relatively unimportant irksome details involved in the administration of this work. With a knowledge of the good that may be accomplished, I find unending pleasure in helping the farmers on all the projects with their difficulties. I find that these men and their families who have with confidence in the integrity of the representatives of their government settled on these government irrigation projects do not expect our Uncle Sam to

demonstrate a paternal interest in their affairs—all they expect is opportunity to make good under the conditions in which they are placed.

O'Donnell saw his responsibility as providing them with that opportunity through instruction, demonstration, and preaching the virtues of being a “practical business farmer.” He relished this role as a national farm advisor. By organizing and hosting a major national meeting on irrigation in Billings on March 1915, however, O'Donnell showed that he had not forgotten his role as a Yellowstone civic capitalist. The business generated by those who attended the meeting, and the positive national exposure of a rapidly booming Billings, brought added, and direct, benefits to the various business ventures of his local partners. The following year, 1916, he extended his help to the immediate region by creating the Midland Empire Fair, a huge celebration of the greater Yellowstone region, with particular emphasis on the areas included in the USRS projects at Huntley and at Shoshone, south of the Montana-Wyoming border, land that O'Donnell referred to as the Midland Empire with Billings as its urban commercial and industrial center. In the eyes of O'Donnell and his allies, the two Reclamation Service projects created the potential for an agricultural bonanza rarely equaled in the northern plains. (29)

The Reclamation Service at first provided O'Donnell with considerable praise. The thirteenth annual report, published in 1915, observed “it may be safely stated that the work of the Supervisor of Irrigation had aided materially in bringing out a feeling of confidence among the water users in the administration of the Reclamation Service and a desire on the part of the water users to cooperate to the fullest extent with the service in the interest of the projects.” But support within the agency waned over the next three years; by the time the Reclamation Service published O'Donnell's *Better Business*,

*Better Farming, Better Living: Hints from a Practical Farmer* in the summer of 1918, O'Donnell resigned as Supervisor of Irrigation. (30)

Agriculture groups outside of the agency acknowledged the significance of O'Donnell's years in the Reclamation Service. In his 1919 article for *The Country Gentleman*, Philip S. Rose praised O'Donnell as the best farmer in Montana, but reserved his highest commendation for his USRS service: "the humanizing of the Reclamation Service has been Mr. O'Donnell's greatest public service." While he may have resigned from the Reclamation Service, he "had not resigned from doing what he can for the general public welfare." (31)

O'Donnell's work in the next decade showed his continued commitment to his early civic capitalist philosophy. While no longer a federal employee, O'Donnell continued as a voice for irrigation and diversified farming for the remainder of his career. He signed on as an agricultural specialist and spokesman for the Great Northern Railway, and the extended Hill railroad interests, during the 1920s. He watched as an outsider as the Reclamation Service was reorganized and renamed the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1923. He continued to write articles supporting reclamation and irrigation. In a 1925 article in the *New Reclamation Era* titled "Irrigation Hints from a Practical Irrigator," he once again sounded a favorite theme: "the better the farming the less irrigation required. . . Cultivation before and after irrigation should be your motto." O'Donnell approved when in 1928 a local group of farmers and settlers created the Huntley Project Irrigation District, ending the federal government's twenty years of administration. In the decade, he also became one of the Yellowstone's first serious collectors of the valley's early history. He paid for a stone obelisk to be placed at the first cemetery in the Billings area; he collected stories from other early settlers

and published them as *Montana Monographs* in 1927. He began to enjoy a semi-retirement, taking a world tour with two of his daughters in 1931. When the New Deal came in the 1930s, some of his early friends in western agriculture, such as Elmwood Mead and M. L. Wilson, held important national positions. O'Donnell, however, accepted only local responsibilities, with an appointment to the state's first Water Conservation Board in 1934. (32)

By the Depression decade, his friend Elmwood Mead was commissioner of the Reclamation Bureau and historians stressed that the future of the agency was to return to its original focus on home making as the true purpose of the Reclamation Bureau. But few now remembered O'Donnell's contribution to reclamation as a "home making" endeavor. O'Donnell himself, in interviews in his last years and in his stab at writing his memoirs, emphasized his cowboy days and the early settlement of Montana, going so far as to pose on the cover of the *Western Humane News* of December 1940 in full cowboy regalia, complete with chaps. After his death in 1948, his family continued Hesper Farm and today his grandson, Harley O'Donnell, still farms the land and maintains the homestead much as it was eighty years ago. But by the end of the century, his contributions had been mostly forgotten even in his home of Yellowstone County. Yet, when the Agriculture Committee of the Billings Area Chamber of Commerce recently planned a one-day guided tour of the now "historic" Huntley Project, "one of Montana's most productive agricultural areas," its schedule included a stop at one of Huntley's best farms, where "the careful rotation of corn, malt barley and sugar beets helps these producers maximize productivity, while combating disease and insect threats." Bud O'Donnell's legacy as the "practical farmer and irrigator" of the early twentieth century is not in the history books, but in the land itself. (33)

## Endnotes

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18. Becker is quoted in Howard, *Green Fields of Montana*, 41-42.
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