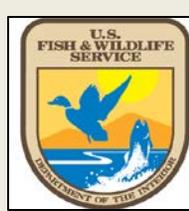




THE H2-O WPA RANCH COMPLEX (24PW0837)

An Early History of the McCormick Family and H2-O Homestead Ranch
Helmville, Powell County, Montana



THE McCORMICK FAMILY

Mary “Molly” A. Cotter McCormick (nee Coughlin) was born in June 1861 in Nebraska, and passed away on December 1, 1928 in Helmville.¹ Thomas McCormick was born in November 1849 in West Meath, Ireland, and passed away on February 13, 1929 in Helmville.² Thomas immigrated to the United States in 1870, arriving in Montana in 1871 via St. Louis and Fort Benton (although other records denote his arrival in Montana or the United States as 1874 or 1876, respectively).³

Mary and Thomas were married in Deer Lodge City and County on April 26, 1888 when Mary was 26 and Thomas was 38.⁴ This appears to have been a second marriage for Mary, who is listed in 1880 U.S. Census records as married to one C.M. Cotter, a miner, in Mount Pleasant, Lewis and Clark County.

The circumstances surrounding Mary’s first marriage and its ultimate dissolution are unclear, although it did produce three children: William, Ella, and Katie Cotter;⁵ in 1910 U.S. Census records, Thomas McCormick is listed as stepfather to Ella and Katie. By 1900 Mary and Thomas had added four children to the family– Frances, Annie, Bertha, and Thomas - and by 1910, were further joined by John (Jack) and Edmund (Edwin).⁶

The family seems to have made an impression on the social and cultural fabric of Montana at the time, with Thomas recognized by his fellow statesmen as having provided “...**substantial aid in the development of the state of his adoption and [exemplifying] in his useful career the best traits of his ancestry and of American citizenship.**”⁷



Front Page: Overview of the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex, looking west-northwest.

At Left: Overview of the far north and east side of the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex, with the Garage/Office at center, looking southeast.

Below: Panoramic overview of the north and east side of the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex, looking northeast.

The McCormicks, as one of the earliest families to settle a homestead ranch in the Blackfoot Valley, established a prominent social foundation in the area for future generations of their descendants. Notably, the local newspaper, *The Silver State Post*, features extensive social commentaries and references regarding the family’s activities from Thomas and Mary’s early occupation of the area around 1893 through the later years of the twentieth century with regard to the McCormick descendants. For example, an early mention of Mary McCormick in *The Silver State Post* defines her as “...**one of the best citizens of [Helmville]...**”⁸ while Thomas McCormick’s obituary notes that he was a “...**pioneer resident of the Helmville country...one of the prominent ranchers and stockmen of his community.**”⁹ Further, Thomas McCormick was featured in the turn-of-the-century publication *Progressive Men of the State of Montana*, which describes him as “...**a prominent and successful rancher near Helmville in Deer Lodge...**”¹⁰ According to local residents of the valley, although the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex is no longer under the ownership of the McCormick family, even to present day their descendants continue to inhabit and contribute to the social and cultural fabric of the same valley homesteaded by their great-great-(and then some) grandparents over 120 years ago.¹¹



Based on a review of chain-of-title property records at the Powell County Clerk and Recorder (PCCR) conducted on July 15, 2015, Cornelius Coughlin received the original patent to the 160-acre homestead on T13N R11W Section 8 NE¼ on February 20, 1892, while Bureau of Land Management General Land Office (BLM GLO) records reflect a comparable date of April 23, 1892.¹² Mary's husband Thomas McCormick, whose occupation is listed in historic records as a farmer,¹³ also received patent to a claim adjacent to Cornelius Coughlin's on February 20, 1892,¹⁴ although BLM GLO records indicate an earlier date of January 31, 1889.¹⁵

At the time the patents were filed on these two adjacent homesteads, a five year proving up period was required, indicating that active efforts to improve these homestead claims may have initiated as early as 1884, though in all likelihood date slightly later to 1887 or 1888, based on deed documents held by the County Clerk and Recorder. Mary and Thomas McCormick appear to have been married around the same time (circa 1888) that Thomas and Cornelius founded neighboring claims in the valley, and it is surmised that the McCormick and Coughlin families settled neighboring homesteads based on the existing familial relationship for the purpose of providing mutual physical (i.e. labor), economic, and material support and assistance with regard to the successful establishment of their respective enterprises, as was relatively common practice in terms of familial support systems on homestead claims across the western U.S. during the late nineteenth century.

Below: Overview of the Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn, northeast façade, looking southwest.



THE HOMESTEAD RANCH

It would appear that after both Cornelius Coughlin and Thomas McCormick successfully proved up, Coughlin almost immediately sold the title to the land to his sister, Mary McCormick; the title transfer was completed in 1893 for \$5,500.00.¹⁶ The rapid sale of title for newly-proved-up homestead claims was not an uncommon practice in many western states, including Montana, as gaining title to western land appealed to many budding Industrial-era capitalists as a direct economic investment with a relatively short (five years, in this case) financial return.¹⁷ As such, it is possible that like many other homesteaders, Cornelius Coughlin quickly cashed in on his investment; conversely, it's possible that Coughlin may simply have wanted to consolidate acreage elsewhere in the valley, as it is clear from reviews of local historic newspapers that the Coughlin family also remained prominent in the area through the twentieth century. Regardless, it made sense to sell the acreage to a neighboring operation, especially when it would directly benefit a relation (i.e. his sister Mary and her family).

The early nature of the McCormick and Coughlin claims is also reflected by the existence of a number of agricultural ditches in the area that are named for the two pioneer families, including the McCormick Ditch (also known as the K. Coughlin Ditch), the McCormick – K. Coughlin Ditch, and the Coughlin Ditch, in addition to multiple other ditches containing the name McCormick; these ditches are located in T14N R11W Sections 15, 22, 25, 26, 27, and 35.¹⁸ It has also been noted that:

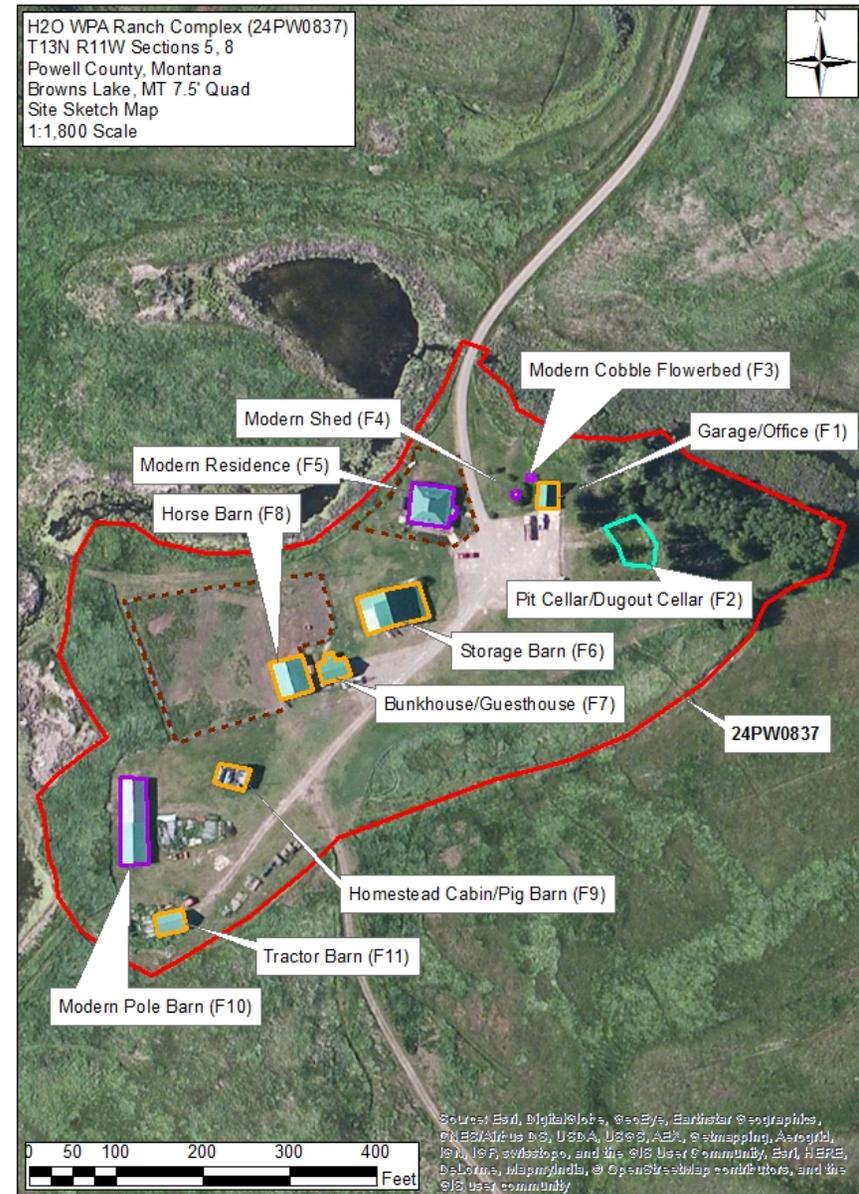
...the price paid for McCormick's property was high at the time at over eleven dollars per acre for land in the Blackfoot River floodplain. The land would be subject to springtime flooding and it is doubtful that it would have been suitable for cultivation, but it would have been ideal for haying. A notation on legal description of the deed points out that the transfer is, **“with all the water rights and water ditches appertaining or belonging thereto,”** suggesting that this was a major feature of this highly valued property. It is likely that the purchase was for a cattle wintering area and homestead that would have been used for the McCormicks to produce hay and feed cattle until spring when they could be returned to the range to graze. Finished cattle would have been moved to the larger markets by the railway.¹⁹

THE HOMESTEAD RANCH (Continued)...

The Coughlin homestead, following its purchase by the McCormick family in 1893, grew into a successful livestock ranching operation, which stayed in the family even following the deaths of Thomas and Mary in the late 1920s. According to local residents of the valley, the McCormick family was responsible for the construction of the (now) historic buildings, structures, and features of the ranch complex that comprise site 24PW0837,²⁰ and historic records note that Thomas McCormick “...has been continuously occupied as a ranchman on one of the best developed and most attractive properties in his neighborhood, which consists of 480 acres...and improved with every necessary appliance and a modern residence recently erected, one of the most artistic ranch dwellings in the northwest.”²¹ In fact, the McCormick family gained title to the entire 640-acres of Section 8 between 1910 and 1923,²² and also acquired acreage in Sections 5 and 9.²³ The ranch continued to be owned and operated under the direct McCormick lineage until its sale in 1964 to Earl G. Athearn, although it is recognized that “...according to local informants, the chain of owners were all [McCormick] relatives until the transfer of the property to the Stranahans in 1990.”²⁴ From this point, the ranch passed through a number of owners and associated ranching organizations, all the while continuously and actively operating as a livestock ranch, until its sale to Mary Stranahan in 1992; the property was subsequently transferred to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service through a donation in 2000.²⁵



Below Left: Overview of the Horse Barn, west façade, looking northeast.
Below Right: Map of the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex (24PW0837), circa 2015.



THE RANCH COMPLEX BUILDINGS & HOMESTEAD CABIN/PIG BARN

The original homestead on the parcel containing the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex was patented by Cornelius Coughlin (Coughlan) in 1892;²⁶ the title to the land was transferred to his sister Mary A. Cotter McCormick (nee Coughlin), who resided on a neighboring homestead claim (which was later consolidated with the greater ranch complex), in 1893.²⁷ The historic ranch complex operated continuously as a ranching operation from the time of its establishment until at least 1992.²⁸ The primary economic activity at the ranch complex through the twentieth century was livestock ranching, presumably of cattle, possibly in addition to smaller animals such as pigs.²⁹ All of the extant historic buildings and structures on the ranch complex continue to actively function for administrative and residential use, livestock management, and storage under the auspices of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, with the exception of a single deteriorating, partially collapsed log cabin which may have served as the original homestead house and later, a pig barn.



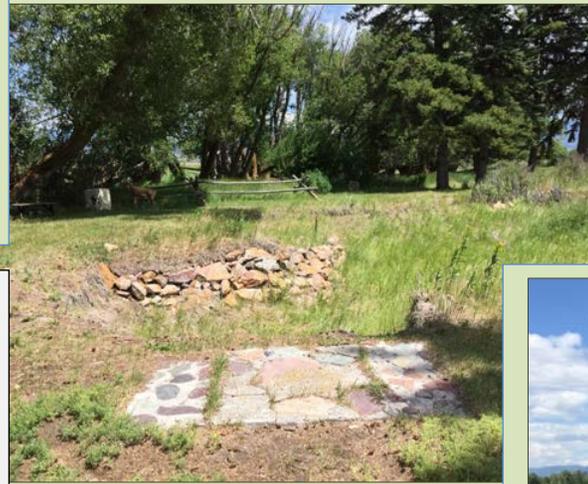
At Left: Overview of the Storage Barn, south façade, looking northwest.



At Right: Overview of the Bunkhouse/Guesthouse, north and west façades, looking southeast.

Surviving historic buildings and structures on the ranch complex that date to the McCormick era include a 1½ story wood frame, front gable Garage/Office with a poured concrete foundation; a remnant Pit Cellar/Dugout Cellar of the original ranch Residence that is no longer standing, having been demolished in the early 1990s; a 1½ story, wood frame and log Storage Barn with a poured concrete foundation and a replacement green metal roof (ca. 1996); a 1½ story wood frame, front gable Bunkhouse/Guesthouse with a raised wood frame foundation constructed from squared lumber and timber posts; a 1½ story, wood frame and log side-gabled Horse Barn with a poured concrete foundation and a replacement green metal roof (ca. 1996); a 1½ story, wood frame and log side-gabled Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn with a poured concrete foundation; and a 1½ story, wood frame, front-gabled Tractor Barn with a replacement green metal roof (ca. 1996).

The Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn is a 1½ story, wood frame and log side-gabled structure with a poured concrete foundation. The building measures approximately 24' x 18'. The roof has collapsed. The lower story is constructed of square hewn timbers with dovetail notching and clay chinking; in several locations wood strip chinking is also observed to overlie places on the exterior of the structure where individual hewn logs meet. It was also noted in a 2006 recording that the interior chinking is comprised of “...**straight-grained softwood (possibly fir) wedged and nailed between the logs.**”³⁰ The wood frame upper story of the building features vertical, sawn lumber siding under the gable ends of the roof. The southwest façade contains a modified wide bay access door, measuring approximately 10' to 12' in width, reframed within the original solid log façade, possibly to accommodate a vehicle.³¹ The original, primary entrance appears to have been along the southeast façade of the building; this entrance was boarded at some point using logs likely taken from one of the later, modified access doors within the building's original façade.³² The northeast façade includes a modified cut-out which was subsequently boarded with horizontal sawn lumber on the interior and exterior of the structure. The northwest façade features a small, modified ground level cut-out (n=2) at each end. The remnants of a collapsed staircase are recognizable within the interior of the structure, as are round timber crossbeams forming structural supports for the interior upper story, although the floorboards have failed. A few square cut nails were observed within the timbers comprising the structure.



At Left: Overview of the Pit Cellar/Dugout Cellar, with a remnant concrete and inlaid cobble pad delineating the primary Residence entry at foreground, looking east-northeast.



At Right: Overview of the Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn, southwest façade, looking northeast.

Corner-Notching: Dovetailing as a Method

Dovetailing is a method of corner notching that is typically (though not exclusively) associated with hewn log construction.³³ The dovetail method is the manifestation of "...one of the most complicated methods of corner timbering, requiring considerable skill in the use of an axe," which functionally and aesthetically "...locks the logs in both directions, produces a box corner, and slopes downward on every face..." in order to prevent water from entering a joint.³⁴ The level of time, effort, and skill required in this method of log construction, with its "strong and durable notch,"³⁵ has led modern practitioners and researchers of log building construction to infer that historically dovetail notching may have been a dominant method used to construct buildings that were intended to be permanent on the landscape.³⁶ In particular, of the extensive variety of corner notching methods available, the dovetail notch "... appears to have the greatest lifespan and be able to maintain itself without a roof, even, than any other notch."³⁷

Dovetailing is thought to have origins in seventeenth century Finland and Sweden,³⁸ and subsequently represent "...[a clear] material culture trait of the Scandinavians," but notably was also present "...in the east Baltic...[and] widely practiced in Russia, Germany, and elsewhere in Central Europe."³⁹ However, multiple additional methods of notching in addition to dovetailing were also common in Germany and Scandinavia, and thus in regions characterized by a geographical diffusion of inhabitants of varied cultural ancestry (such as Montana, or the American West in general), it is difficult to assign specific cultural affiliation with certainty based solely on notch types.⁴⁰ Further, during the period of westward expansion of the late Industrial Era United States, differing styles of corner notching, along with other, formerly culturally distinct characteristics of log building construction,

...began to lose whatever national or ethnic diversity they once may have had, and personal tastes and individual genius played an important part in the design of a log cabin consonant with the environment and available materials...In this acculturation an American log cabin finally emerged, incorporating basic Scandinavian and German traits, with modifications by the Scotch-Irish and others, and a point in time was eventually reached when it became utterly impossible to identify a log cabin during the postpioneer period in nationalistic terms. The log cabin became a syncretistic American product, even though its ancestry, like many other American institutions, lay in Europe.⁴¹

Moreover, various styles of corner notching on log buildings in the United States, "...while [representative of] Old World importations, were used contemporaneously in the postpioneer American settlements depending upon the skill, the whims, the available tools and materials, and the previous experience of the builder...[the] folk house represented by the log cabin became, in time, a coalescence of many influences."⁴²



Above: Detail of dovetail notching on the Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn.

Thus, while it is virtually impossible in the absence of additional evidence to assign a specific cultural affiliation to the original, unknown builder of the McCormick Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn based exclusively on the building's dovetail corner notching, it is likely that its historical stylistic influence ultimately originated in Scandinavia or Germany. This trait then evolved across time and space as Europeans emigrated to the United States, and again as later generations of Euroamericans expanded west across the American Frontier following the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862. Eventually, an amalgamation of diverse log building construction techniques, including corner notching methods, emerged as a regionally-distinct hybridization of cultural traits, styles, and materials, coming full circle to form the vernacular, rustic log style that today both symbolizes and distinguishes the historical and dominant architectural traditions of Montana and the greater Rocky Mountain region.⁴³

NATIONAL REGISTER SIGNIFICANCE

The National Register Criteria of Significance include four major components (Criteria A, B, C, and D) under which a resource can be determined to retain a level of historical significance rising to a level sufficient for recognition via nomination and potential listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP):

- **Criterion A** - a historic property must be associated with "...events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history";
- **Criterion B**, a historic property must be associated with "...the lives of significant persons in our past";
- **Criterion C**, a historic property must "...embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or...represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or...represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction"; and
- **Criterion D**, a historic property must "...have yielded or may be likely to yield, information important in history or prehistory."⁴⁴

The H2-O WPA Ranch Complex is considered eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, as the property falls under the broad patterns of history for early livestock ranching operations in the Blackfoot Valley; under Criterion B, the site is deemed eligible for its association with historically noteworthy individuals (the McCormick family) in the local and regional histories of Helmville and Powell County. The site's period of significance as pertains to its NRHP-eligibility determination accordingly emphasizes the operational years of the ranch under the ownership of the McCormick family (circa 1893-1964). In particular, the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex is significant for its representation of an early, successful livestock operation denoted by middle class, family-oriented ownership; it is broadly representative of this ubiquitous site type within the late nineteenth century history of Powell County and the greater American West, and its significance is compounded by the diminishing number of these sites as a result of advancing age and associated deterioration of structural conditions exacerbated by general neglect. Moreover, the only ranch-themed site listed on the National Register for Powell County is the Grant-Kohrs Ranch, reflecting Montana's era of wealthy cattle baron landowners, which subsequently lends further credence to the significance of the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex as more broadly representative of the commonality and reality of smaller-scale, middle class ranching efforts of the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries across Powell County and Montana. Finally, the site is significant at the local level under Criterion B for its association with the McCormick family, who within Helmville and Powell County are noteworthy individuals for their participation in the early Euro-American settlement and establishment of the economic foundations of the area, as well as the length of their tenure with regard to the site's ranching activities (71 years) and the family's continuous presence in Helmville and Powell County through to present day.



At Left: Overview of the condition of the interior of the Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn, looking northeast, circa 2015.

While the Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn may be associated with the earliest occupation of the original homestead claim by the Coughlin and/or McCormick families, its subsequent, significant alterations and function as a livestock shelter more squarely place it within the broader period of significance for the operational years of the ranch under the ownership of the McCormick family. This building is subsequently considered a contributing component to the H2-O WPA Ranch Complex site's overall significance and associated NRHP eligibility due to its function as an element of the site's greater ranching operation and associated activities during the period of McCormick family ownership and occupation; however, the Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn has lost its integrity of design due to its poor structural condition and historical alterations (such as the excision of portions of the log walls to accommodate the addition of multiple livestock access doors, as well as a large access door for a vehicle). The Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn's extant walls retain some integrity of workmanship and materials, particularly with regard to its dovetailed corners, although overall, the building is in poor condition as of 2015 with a collapsed roof and interior elements such as the upper story floorboards and staircase, missing windows, and failing chinking. Interestingly, the poured concrete foundation is identical to that of several other historic structures on the ranch complex which may post-date the original construction of the Homestead Cabin/Pig Barn. The cabin appears to be one of the earliest structures on the site, based on the presence of square cut nails in its extant façades; it is likely that this building originally functioned as the earliest residence structure for the Coughlin and/or McCormick families, eventually replaced by the larger residence (which as of 2015 is no longer standing). Further, based on the presence of the poured concrete foundation, which almost certainly is not original to the structure, in conjunction with a dearth of documentation related to the early years of the ranch complex, it seems possible that the building may have been relocated from an unknown original location to serve its later purpose as a livestock shelter in its current position adjacent to the other barn buildings. Whatever the case, this building has certainly been significantly altered from its original state and function as an early homestead cabin or residence. Due to its poor level of integrity and associated deteriorating condition, this structure is slated for future demolition.

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