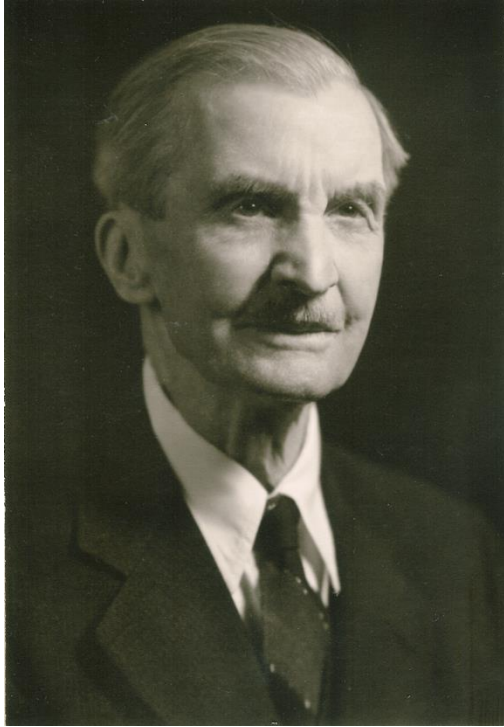


## I.D. O'Donnell



One of the nation's leading figures in agriculture, I.D. O'Donnell greatly influenced the growth of farming in the Billings region. Called "The Best Farmer in Montana", he was also deeply involved in the Billings community.

Ignatius Daniel O'Donnell, better known by his initials, and to his friends as Bud, was born in Simcoe, Ontario in Canada in 1860. His family moved to Saginaw, Michigan when he was six. His father was a timberman, and the young O'Donnell became an expert woodsman as he grew up. At 22, he came west to Montana, taking the train to Miles City, then onward by wagon, foot and horseback, heading first for the Maiden gold fields. He was working on a horse ranch near present-day Lewistown when he met Parmly Billings and his cousin E.G. Bailey.

This led to a job as foreman of the thousands of acres of the Billings family property, eight miles west of the young town. When Parmly Billings passed away unexpectedly in 1885, O'Donnell bought out his portion of the business. He gained

experience in large-scale farming. There he rebuilt the existing irrigation system.

O'Donnell and Bailey bought the Hesper Farm from Reverend B.F. Shuart in 1888, and O'Donnell turned it into an agricultural laboratory. He bought out Bailey's interest in 1900. O'Donnell experimented with irrigation, and new methods of growing alfalfa, wheat and oats. His work with sugar beets was instrumental in establishing the industry in Montana. He built the sugar-beet processing plant in Billings, which was later sold to the Great Western Sugar Company. O'Donnell also built the first creamery and the Billings Foundry and Machine Company.

The canal previously owned by the Billings family was purchased by a group of farmers in 1892. They elected O'Donnell as president of the company running that canal, now known as the Big Ditch, that irrigated some 100,000 acres. O'Donnell was also involved in the development of the Billings Land and Irrigation Company canal, which irrigated the area that is now the Heights.

O'Donnell bought his family home on Clark Avenue in 1905. The house was designed by the preeminent Montana architectural firm, Link & Haire. He, his wife Louise, who he married in Michigan in 1887, and their three sons and three daughters moved in. The home is still in his family, and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

O'Donnell became supervisor of irrigation for the US Reclamation Commission – which he helped to organize – in 1916. His work saw him develop methods of regulating payments and water usage for irrigation throughout much of the West. He also advised farmers about crop usage and how to get their yields to the right markets. In 1918, O'Donnell published a monograph through the US Reclamation Service entitled *Hints From a Practical Farmer*. In it, he got down to the nitty-gritty details of the business of farming. It covered layout of fields, implements, irrigation, crop choice, proper rations for

livestock and keeping accounts. Many examples in the book came straight from the Hesper Farm. He remained with the service through his retirement in 1920. He retired from management with The Big Ditch in 1936, and one of his sons took over managing the Hesper Farm in the early 1940s.

O'Donnell was the last surviving charter member of the Pioneers of Eastern Montana. He was also deeply interested in preserving the history of those early settlers. In 1928, assisted by his daughter Teresa, he started gathering oral histories from his fellow Pioneers. The transcripts of those conversations were later edited by O'Donnell and gathered into a two loose-leaf binders he called *Montana Monographs*. He donated them to the Parmly Billings Memorial Library. Years later in 2007, his grandson Harley reworked them into an actual book.

If all that wasn't enough, O'Donnell was also deeply involved in business and civic affairs in Billings and Montana. He was a director of the Merchants National Bank, the first president of the Yellowstone County Fair board, a director of the Commercial Club, the first chair of the state horticultural board, on the state defense council during World War I. He was on the board of the Billings Polytechnic Institute (now Rocky Mountain College) from its founding in 1908 until 1937. He was a school district trustee for several years. He was a member of the Parmly Billings Memorial Library board from its 1901 founding through the next 44 years.

O'Donnell passed away in January, 1948, at the age of 87.

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