

The Frenchwoman and MacDonald Pass

by Jon Axline, MDT Historian

Helena's history has been closely tied to the road systems that served the Queen City. When gold was discovered on Last Chance Gulch in July 1864, the Prickly Pear Valley was part of an ancient transportation corridor that was already familiar to Montana's pioneers, who, like most people, were always looking for quicker ways to get from here to there. In Helena's case, it meant finding better routes over the continental divide west of the mining camp. The best route is now called MacDonald Pass, and for nearly 150 years, it has played a critical role in the development and economic prosperity of the area.

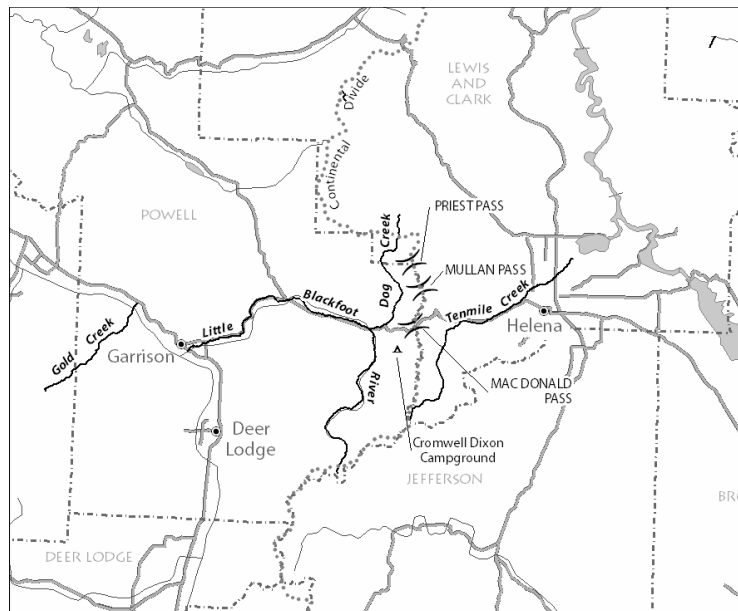
Of the three mountain passes west of Helena that provide connections to the Deer Lodge and Missoula Valleys, MacDonald Pass is the best known. Initially, however, Mullan Pass was the preferred way over the divide for Montana's pioneers. The Indians knew the pass well before it was "discovered" by Lieutenant John Mullan in 1854. By the early 1860s it was frequently used by prospectors and others traveling between Fort Benton and the gold camps on Grasshopper and Gold Creeks. While the pass itself was located at a relatively low elevation, the road leading to it was daunting for freighters because of the steep grades and tight curves. Nearby Priest Pass was constructed as a toll road by a local entrepreneur looking for a way to finance his gold prospecting trips. Built by Chinese laborers in 1880, Priest Pass had become the main route over the divide by the mid-1880s. It was even a state highway for a time in the early 20th century.

MacDonald Pass originated as a toll road in 1867. When Montana Territory was formed in 1864, its legislators had no money to build roads. Consequently, they licensed toll companies to build and maintain the territory's roads and bridges. The first incarnation of a road over the pass was popularly known as the Frenchwoman's Road area. Built by a French-Canadian named Constant Guyot, the new road provided a more direct route to the Deer Lodge Valley from Helena. Governor Green Clay Smith grudgingly approved the license for the road after complaining about the fact that Guyot wanted to charge travelers for its use before the road had been completed. An advertisement in a November 1867 issue of the *Deer Lodge Weekly Independent* advertised it as "The most direct route from Deer Lodge City. . . . The road is thoroughly STAKED OUT, so that it will be impossible to go astray while the snow is on. Travelers can be accommodated with meals and lodgings at the French Woman's." The "French Woman" was Guyot's wife, one of only a few female toll road operators in Montana.

Details about Madame Guyot are vague. She is referred to in the historical record simply as the "Frenchwoman" or the "Old Frenchwoman." No photographs of her have been found. Only one physical description of her has surfaced, and it is fanciful at best. In 1881, a newspaper described her as a "neat looking critter – black-haired, black-eyed, and sharp, and cute lookin', maybe thirty years old, an' a good housekeeper." While accounts praise Mrs. Guyot, the reports of her husband are less than flattering: He was a hard-drinking worthless boor—and likely a murderer. The Guyots arrived in Montana in late 1864 and purchased a ranch in the Ruby Valley. By early 1866 they had relocated to Little Blackfoot River Valley and built a ranch just east of present Elliston.

The Frenchwoman maintained a hotel in a log cabin near Dog Creek at the west end of the toll road, near its junction with the Mullan Pass road. The woman's hospitality was celebrated by the many travelers between Deer Lodge and Helena. As

many as thirty men could be found sleeping on the floor of her two-room "hotel" at any one time. All the meals were served in the same room where the people slept. Lodging at Madame Guyot's was \$2 a night and meals one dollar. In addition to the cabin, the site included a barn, corrals, and the toll gate. Constant Guyot spent most of his time working a hay ranch about two miles away and had little to do with the toll road. In early August 1868, the Frenchwoman was found murdered, her cabin ransacked, and around \$6,000 in gold dust missing. Details of the crime are unclear, but sus-



picion immediately fell upon her husband and his hired hand. Deer Lodge County offered a reward of \$500 for the apprehension and trial of the murderers, but the *Montana Post* was much more true to its vigilante heritage—it recommended that the killers be strung up as soon as they were caught. No one was ever brought to justice for the murder of Madame Guyot. Many suspected her husband had committed the crime. The couple did not get along well, especially when Constant was in his cups. He could not account for the time between when he said he left the cabin and when the crime was committed. Constant left the area soon after his wife's death. According to local folklore, he later confessed to the crime after murdering his second wife for her money. Many believed that the Frenchwoman's spirit remained behind in her cabin, terrifying travelers who stopped there for years afterward.

General William Tecumseh Sherman and his entourage used the Frenchwoman's Road while on a fact-finding tour through the northern Rockies and Pacific Northwest in 1877. His aide, Colonel Orlando Poe, described the "road [as] dusty but not otherwise bad. . . . A very good [toll] road has been made over

the mountain range, the highest point of the pass being at an elevation of about 6,000 feet. . . . At 2 p.m. we attained the crest and began the descent, making good progress until we reached Frenchwoman's Ranch, where we were detained for about an hour by a hot box on the general's ambulance."

By the time Sherman and his companions traveled the road, it was owned by Alexander MacDonald, who purchased the road from "Lige" Dunphy in 1876. MacDonald, like Dunphy, operated it as a county-licensed toll road. During Dunphy's tenure, he corduroyed low sections of the road and built a tollhouse (which still stands) and gate on the Helena side of the pass. Shortly after taking control of the road in 1868, Dunphy hired Canadian emigrant and sometime prospector MacDonald to manage it while he concentrated on his sawmill business. MacDonald contracted with the stagecoach firm of Gilmer, Salisbury & Company for use of the road. The tollhouse provided meals to the stagecoach passengers and hay for the horses from a meadow located near today's Cromwell Dixon Campground. As many as three stages daily traversed the road between Deer Lodge and Helena.

Sometime between 1876 and 1878, MacDonald turned over management of the road to Valentine Priest. Priest left the day-to-day operation of the toll road to his daughters while he prospected for gold. Probably in 1879, Priest rediscovered a pass that had originally been used by prospectors traveling to the Kootenai country in the early 1860s. Because of the relatively low elevation of the pass and the somewhat easier grade, Priest terminated his employment with MacDonald in 1879 and built a toll road over what would become known as Priest's Pass, a short distance to the north of MacDonald's operation. MacDonald resumed management of his toll road after Priest's defection.

As Priest's road neared completion, he was able to induce the Gilmer, Salisbury & Company to use his road rather than MacDonald's. The company's division agent praised Priest's nearly finished thoroughfare as a "good road with the exception of a few rocks and a mudhole or two." The road was so good, in fact, that usage of the MacDonald Pass road dropped sharply, eventually forcing MacDonald to sell his property in 1885.

Shortly after Montana achieved statehood in 1889, Lewis and Clark and Deer Lodge Counties took over the MacDonald and Priest Pass roads and made them public thoroughfares. The counties, however, only actively maintained the Mullan Pass road and MacDonald and Priest Passes fell into decay and were seldom used.

In 1912, Lewis and Clark County and newly created Powell County contracted with the Montana State Prison for the use of convict labor to improve the MacDonald Pass route. Convict crews specialized in the construction of roads through difficult terrain, such as MacDonald Pass. In return for their on-the-job training, the prisoners had a measure of freedom that was not possible behind bars and could earn a reduction in their sentences—as long as they didn't try to escape. The counties paid for the construction equipment and the maintenance of the pris-

oners. During the early Twenties, there were additional improvements made by the counties to MacDonald Pass.

In 1927, MacDonald Pass became part of Montana's federal highway system and was designated a component of U.S. Highway 10-North. That year, the Montana Highway Department began planning for the construction of a road westward from Helena over the continental divide to Garrison. Even with the preference for MacDonald Pass over Priest and Mullan Passes,

the department's engineers debated the relative merits of all three routes. They concluded that the heavy work involved in improving either Priest or Mullan Passes ruled out their designation as the primary route over the divide. They also, wrongfully, concluded that "It is a significant fact that the old freight road built and used by the pioneers used MacDonald Pass in spite of its higher elevation." (Priest Pass and Mullan Pass were used just as frequently.)

The Highway Department and the federal Bureau of Public Roads programmed a project to improve the grade and curves of MacDonald Pass and place a graveled sur-

face on it. Within months, the department had their surveyors on the route mapping the grades and curves. The Nolan Brothers Company of Minneapolis won the contract to upgrade the road in early 1931, and construction began on May 18th. Because of the Great Depression, the federal government funded nearly all of the \$89,000 project. Federal and state regulations also encouraged the use of local labor with only a minimum of heavy equipment used on the project. My grandfather, a civil engineer working for the Highway Department at that time, met his future wife while working on the project. She was the

daughter of a local rancher whom Nolan Brothers hired to operate a horse-drawn fresno [similar to a scraper or leveler] on MacDonald Pass. The contractors employed many farmers and ranchers from the Little Blackfoot and Ten Mile Creek Valleys to help build the road. Construction of the road was completed in 1932, and it was paved by 1935. Traces of the old Frenchwoman's/MacDonald Pass Road can still be seen along U.S. Highway 12 west of the MDT's maintenance section house to the base of the pass near Elliston.

In 1935, the Montana Highway Department constructed a section house just below the continental divide. The building, which still stands, was the first section house built by the department. The rustic building provides shelter to men and equipment "stationed in storm areas" to keep the pass open in the winter. The water fountains on the pass were installed at about the same time and were not intended to provide drinking water to thirsty motorists, but to supply water to their overheated automobiles. By 1939, the MacDonald Pass road was described as "highly developed, smooth-surfaced, regularly graded and widely curved . . . [fitting] into the scenery and also the economic scheme of things." By 1963, the Highway Department planned the eventual reconstruction of the highway to a four-lane facility, a plan that eventually came to pass in 1979.



The Montana Highway Department's first maintenance section house still stands just below the continental divide on the east side of the pass.



This fountain on the east side of MacDonald Pass is original—the one on the west side is a reconstruction.