



# PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Posse of Westerners

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## SEPTEMBER MEETING

Monday, Sept. 18, 2023

**Topic:** "Fools Rush In: Johnny Grant and the Early Montana Cattle Industry"

**Presenter:** Lyndel Meikle, of Deer Lodge, Montana

**Where:** Second floor of the Northwest Montana History Museum, 124 2nd Ave. East, Kalispell

**Time:** General membership meeting at 6 p.m., followed by Greet 'n' Gab, book raffle and book signings.

Beer, wine and soft drinks available for purchase from museum staff.

**Historic Presentation:** Program begins at 7:00 p.m. No reservations are required, but seating will be limited; so come early since space may be limited.

There will be no Zoom at this meeting. Our Zoom volunteer, Tim Christenson, is out of town.



Historic drawing of Grant's home. The farmhouse is now the centerpiece of the Grant-Kohr Ranch.

## ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

For years the story of one of Montana's most influential pioneers was a patchwork of other people's memories in diaries, letters and gossip.

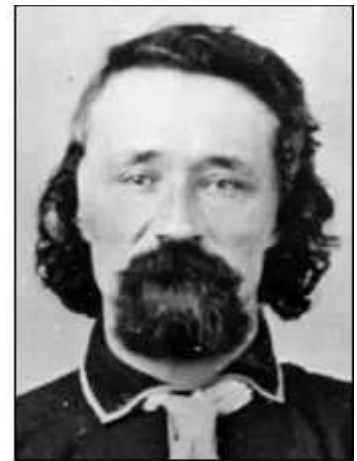
But a vague clue led speaker Lyndel Meikle on a nearly unbelievable hunt that tracked down Johnny Grant's autobiography.

Lyndel, a ranger at the Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site for 39 years, will describe her search and what it revealed about the man who had 26 children by eight mothers, and made his fortune raising and selling livestock throughout the West.

He helped found the town of Deer Lodge, and his legacy lives on in the Grant-Kohrs Ranch.

Grant was born in 1831 at Fort Edmonton in present-day Alberta. As a teenager he joined his father at the Hudson's Bay Company trading post Fort Hall, Idaho Territory, on the Oregon Trail. He soon established a successful trade in buying trail-weary livestock from the emigrants and selling them fresh animals he had nurtured back to health on the lush grasslands of southern Idaho.

His business spread to southwest Montana, where he established his ranch in 1859. He developed a market for his cattle and horses in mining camps in Idaho and California. Business jumped when gold was discovered in nearby



"Johnny" Grant

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Bannack, Virginia City and Helena.

In 1862 Grant began building the large house that is now the centerpiece of the Grant-Kohrs Ranch, and lived there with his Bannock tribe wife, Quarra.

His ranch included a trading post, sawmill, blacksmith shop and other businesses. He also operated a freight business that crossed the mountains to the steamboat terminal at Ft. Benton, Montana.

As a French-Canadian closely tied to the tribes of the area, he felt out of place in the influx of English-speaking American settlers. In 1866 Grant sold his ranch to Conrad Kohrs, and returned to Canada.

He died in 1907 at Edmonton near the Hudson's Bay Company post where he had been born.

### ***About the Presenter***

Lyndel was born in Helena, and her parents had a silver mine than didn't pan out.

The family moved to California, and she had a varied career that included working as a flight attendant on Tiger Airlines during the Vietnam war.

In 1976 she returned to Montana to work for the National Park Service at the Grant-Kohrs Ranch.

Retired from the National Park Service, she now works with the FFA and Agricultural Education program at the Deer Lodge High School, where she teaches basic blacksmith skills.

As well as editing Johnny Grant's memoir, she authored an autobiography *Accidental Ranger* and a history of Deer Lodge, and contributed to *Speaking Ill of the Dead*.



## **FROM THE SHERIFF'S SADDLEBAG**

By Edward "Eddy" Byrne

Fall has arrived and the weather has been perfect, gone is the summer heat and Winter is still months away (hopefully). The morning dew and pleasant days have kept me outside more than ever. It is a great time to get out and see the sights and plan a day trip to one of your favorite outdoor locations – preferably with a historical focus. I recently spent several evenings down the Swan, finally having dinner at the Laughing Horse. The outdoor dining experience in the gardens and the quality of the meals was incredible. I highly recommend it. Just remember to call in advance to make reservations.

As we move to finish the year strong with the last three meetings of 2023, I begin to reflect on the growth of the Posse this year. The membership numbers are increasing after a significant drop during the previous two “COVID” years. In addition, the guest attendance has been a pleasant surprise and has provided a steady income stream to assist in covering costs. I attribute this to our marketing monthly meetings primarily due to Rick Hull’s efforts in writing and editing the Pony Tracks Express, this publication, and ensuring each meeting is published in advance. Finally, this year's topics and presenters remain the bedrock of our success. Simply put, the programs have been superb.

Moving forward, we need to maintain the quality of our programs while attracting and growing the Posse members. I ask each of you to reach out to like-minded history buffs and invite them to attend one of our final three events this year. If any of you have ideas on how to improve and/or grow the organization, feel free to come early and attend the board meeting before the presentation.

The Board meets from 6:00-6:30 p.m. before the 7 p.m. presentation at the museum. All

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members are welcome to attend to observe the meeting. Also, anyone interested in becoming more involved in the Posse is encouraged to volunteer.

Once again to volunteer or if you have any questions, recommendations, or concerns, please get in touch with me at 406-871-6001 or [edwardjbyrne860@gmail.com](mailto:edwardjbyrne860@gmail.com).

## GENERAL MEETING INFORMATION

**NMPW 's** meetings are held on the third Monday of the month, except the months of December and January.

Sessions begin with a board and general membership meeting at 6 p.m., followed by a Greet 'n' Gab for a chance to get acquainted. Historical attire is encouraged, but not required.

Local history authors will have their books for sale, and will be available for signing.

The historic presentation starts at 7 p.m. and is free for members and youths 16 and under. Non-members pay \$5.

Historic books are raffled off as a fund raiser.

Contact Kathy at [kbrittonrn@gmail.com](mailto:kbrittonrn@gmail.com) with any questions .

## FUTURE PROGRAMS

- **October 16:**  
“Indian Trails of the Northern Rockies”  
by Darris Flanagan of Fortine
- **November 20:**  
“The Battle of Butte ”  
by Doug Ammons of Missoula



## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Members aware of events are encouraged to contact Ye Editor with the particulars at [richardahull@charter.net](mailto:richardahull@charter.net)

## FROM YE EDITOR'S DESK

By Rick Hull



A trio of old-time carriages are among the many vehicles on display at the Polson Museum.

Another of the community museums staffed and operated by volunteers is the Polson Flathead Lake Museum. Located downtown at 708 Main Street, it contains the usual photographs and displays. But it is also stuffed with historic vehicles of all kinds, ranging from horse-drawn wagons and carriages, to antique automobiles and fire engines.



A local celebrity, "Rudolf", has been memorialized.

And there is a fully rigged sailing boat, and a collection of antique outboard motors.

A stuffed deer, standing in for a reindeer, pulls a sleigh. Not to be outdone, Rudolf, a stuffed

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Highland Steer, is hitched to his own carriage.

The museum even has a fully stocked trading post in the back lot that was reassembled after being hauled from its original historic location.



**Polson's original trading post was moved from its river location to the museum's back lot.**

A personal favor from my past is the linotype machine. It revolutionized printing in the 1880s and was in use for over a century. Bigger than a piano, it combined a typewriter and a foundry to spit out type one line at a time. I tell people when I started in the journalism, newspapers still used molten lead to set type.

The museum also has the infamous Nessie, a large stuffed sturgeon. A controversy rages over whether the giant fish was actually caught in Flathead Lake, and whether its brethren are responsible for sightings of the Flathead Monster. The display does include a first-hand account of the struggle to land the giant fish.



**Is "Nessie" really the Flathead Lake Monster?**

Polson has a lot of history to preserve, and the museum does a good job of it. It is open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The phone number is 406-883-3049.

## **TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE MONTH**

Last month's question was about the toughest towns in historic Montana. All three were railroad construction towns. McCarthyville, on the Great Northern Railway near Essex, was locally notorious. But what were the other two?

Pat Walsh had the correct answer on both: Taft and Weeksville. Taft was on the the Milwaukee Road along present-day Interstate 90 near St. Regis. Weeksville was on the Northern Pacific on Highway 200 near Thompson Falls. After lengthy research, Walsh said he finally located Weeksville in *The Pioneers*, a typewritten manuscript by amateur Kalispell historian Sam Johns.

Michael Ober knew about Taft, and had even written an article about the town. Barbara Boorman also guessed Taft.

I hadn't heard of the Taft until reading *The Big Burn* about the 1910 fire. A documentary on Taft is available on YouTube.

Taft was around longer than the other two and boasted a population of 7,000. It was said to have a murder rate higher than Chicago and five prostitutes for every man.

Weeksville had a large population of Chinese laborers. It was known for its lynchings, with one national newspaper reporting a total of 10.

Nothing remains of the three towns today, though Weeksville is an official U.S. Census place. Taft burned in the 1910 fire and was never rebuilt.

### ***This Month's Trivia Question***

Canada did not become a self-governing country until after the American Civil War. What was a big complication in assembling modern Canada that wasn't settled until 1870?

Submit your answer to Ye Editor at [richardahull@charter.net](mailto:richardahull@charter.net) and we will print the names of all those who get it right.

## CANADIAN CONNECTION

### Angus McDonald, the prolific Hudson's Bay Company Trader

By Rick Hull

Much of Montana's early history is commingled with Canada's. There are the tribes, especially the Kootenai and Blackfeet, whose territories overlapped the border. There were Canadians, like David Thompson, who mapped and explored what Lewis and Clark missed. There were the Metis and Cree, who fled south of the border after conflicts with whites on the north side.

And there was the Hudson's Bay Company, which established trading posts all across the Northwest, and settled in to stay. And the company didn't push local Indians aside; its employees lived among the tribes in a mutual economy.

Among those employees was Angus McDonald. Though a series of events, the transplanted Scotsman would become a patriarch of the Flathead Indians and leave his name on the geography of northwest Montana.

We know about his life, because he wrote it down. The man who carried the collected works of Shakespeare in his pack considered himself a gifted writer. Angus filled ledger after ledger with not only tales of his travels and adventures, but with poetry and plays. Fortunately the ledgers ended up in state historical library in Helena. No one knows for sure who donated them.

Angus was born in Craig, Scotland in 1816. Like many of his countrymen, in 1838 he decided to accept a position with Hudson's Bay Company. He was an avid hunter, and a family rumor says his decision to leave Scotland came after he was caught poaching.

Scotsmen in the Hudson's Bay Company were typically outpost managers and clerks, while the French voyageurs carried trade goods into the back country, and packed bundles of fur out.

His first post was at Fort Colvile at Kettle Falls, north of present-day Spokane. The journey from the company headquarters on Hudson Bay included a terrifying journey down the Columbia. The boat nearly was swamped running the Columbia River rapids.

In 1840 he was sent to Fort Hall in southeast Idaho near present-day Pocatello. Because of over-harvest, the fur trade was declining. But Fort Hall was on the Oregon Trail, and had a steady stream of customers in passing wagon trains. Not only did the trading post resupply the settlers, but the employees furnished them with a written guide listing good camping places with grass and water, the



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distances between them, and which roads were good or bad.

Angus worked under Captain Richard Grant, who was married to the mixed-race daughter of his boss at Fort Edmonton. Angus set his eyes on Catherine Baptiste, also a mix of Nez Perce, Scot and Mohawk. Marrying into local tribes was almost a company requirement – white women were scarce and tribal alliances with in-laws were important.

But first the teenage Catherine had to accompany her family on a trading expedition to the southwest desert. The trip was a near-fatal disaster, and Angus would later record Catherine's retelling in detail in his ledgers.

Sometime about 1840 the marriage was formalized in a tribal ceremony. Angus later agreed to an official marriage by a Catholic priest.

For the next seven years, Angus was kept busy traveling from one post to another. His trips included Fort Vancouver, which was the Hudson's Bay Company regional headquarters near the mouth of the Columbia River. During one visit in 1844, he had to help fight off a wildfire that threatened to engulf the fort.

In 1847 Angus was offered a post of his own in the Flathead Indian county of northwest Montana. The area would forever be connected with McDonald and his offspring, though Angus would spend few of his working years there.

On his way, his party of five was attacked by 60 Blackfeet warriors. Fortunately the band was satisfied with stealing the group's 29 horses and not taking scalps.

The original Flathead post was on Crow Creek, near present-day Pablo. McDonald moved it to Post Creek, halfway between Ronan and St. Ignatius. He called it Fort Connen, after his home valley in Scotland. But a friend, Benetse Finlay, had trouble with the name and it became Fort Connah.

In the meantime Catherine had the first two of what would be 12 children.

It was in the Flathead Valley that McDonald adopted the dress of the Flatheads. The only feature that would distinguish him was his beard, which grew longer by the year. Often he would participate in the Indian dances, and on occasion demonstrate the traditional broadsword dance of his home country.

Standing six feet tall and of athletic build, Angus was able to overpower fur trappers who had too much to drink or were otherwise out of hand. He was also known as a dead shot with his rifle that he fondly named "Hoolahan". And he was skilled in his ability to pick up tribal languages.

In 1849 Catherine gave birth to Duncan, who would eventually take over Ft. Connah and forge his own local heritage.

In 1852 Angus was promoted again, requiring him to return to the administrative headquarters at Fort Colville. By now the 49th parallel had extended to the Pacific, putting Washington firmly in the United States.

Isaac Stevens, the new Washington Territorial Governor, and his small army arrived in 1853 as part of an effort to map the area, and sign treaties with all the tribes. It was then that Angus was to experience the difference between how the Hudson's Bay Company dealt with the tribes, and how the



**The Ft. Connah trading post is said to be the oldest existing building in Montana**



Americans treated them. In a treaty negotiated at present day Missoula, the Flathead Indians received a reservation located south of Flathead Lake. But had to cede more than 20 million acres. There was also a vague promise they could stay in their traditional home in the Bitterroot Valley. Later that would be callously overturned.

The Hudson's Bay Company continued to operate south of the border and Angus continued his business and hunting trips around the Northwest. The U.S. Army arrived in Fort Colville, and built their own fort – this time spelled Fort Colville.

In 1865, with the end of the Civil War, the United States began to work on buying out the Hudson's Bay Company. Appraisals were made, and in 1869 a price of \$650,000 was agreed upon.

At age 54, Angus decided to take up an offer by the Flathead Tribe, and moved back to western Montana. In 1870 he became a naturalized citizen of the United States.

His son, Duncan, had been running Ft. Connah. And daughter Christine was a bookkeeper. The family raised cattle on their Ft. Connah ranch.

Angus concentrated on his writing, authoring a history of the Nez Perce War of 1877 with Duncan. It was one of the first accounts that told Chief Joseph's side of the journey and battles, and included a poem by Angus about the Nez Perce mothers and children caught in the crossfire.

Complications from a fall in January 1889 led to his death at age 73. He and Catherine are buried in a family plot behind Ft. Connah.

The 9,824-foot mountain behind his former ranch is named for him, as well its glacier and valley lake. His offspring married locally, and McDonald is now a prominent name among tribal members.



**The McDonald family grave site at Ft. Connah**

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