



Murrieta Valley Historical Society Newsletter

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It is our mission to identify, preserve and promote the historic legacy of the Murrieta Valley and to educate the public about its historical significance.

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A road crew is laying cement on Washington Avenue in 1915 as a part of the Inland Highway construction project. (Source: E Hale Curran Collection. The Murrieta Public Library's Heritage Room)

John McNeill, Murrieta Blacksmith

By Jeffery G. Harmon

His past is surrounded in mystery because he kept to himself the details of his early life. Historians do not know who his relatives were or where he was from. What is known is that he was a skilled blacksmith, and he was newly married when he came to Murrieta with a highway construction crew in 1915. He was here for a brief time and then he picked

up his tools and left town. Eventually he returned to Temecula in the early 1930s where a tragic event would unfold and then everyone would know his name, John McNeill.

According to his World War I Draft Card, John Daniel McNeill was born August 14, 1884 in Scotland. In census records he stated that he immigrated to America in



Daniel McMaster, a.k.a John McNeill, November 27, 1908
Source: Ancestry.com

1900 or 1904. Later in life, an official document claimed that he was born in Massachusetts. Research suggests that his father may have been a Scottish immigrant who crossed the Canadian border and settled in Boston. As stated above, John McNeill came to Murrieta in 1915 during the paving of the county highway.

The Inland Highway was conceived as an alternative route

between Los Angeles and San Diego. The highway wound its way from town to town across four counties. In December 1913, Riverside County voters passed a \$1,125,000 Good Roads bond to pave the highway from San Bernardino to the San Diego county line. In March 1915, Connors Construction Company in Los Angeles won the contract to pave 8.85 miles of the concrete highway segment from Elsinore to Murrieta for \$26,712.97. The company hired John McNeill, a blacksmith, with his portable shop, to make repairs on tools and equipment when needed.

In April, the road crew made camp in Murrieta and began constructing the highway working its way north to Elsinore. By September, the construction crew had completed the contract. Connors Construction was then awarded the contract to pave the 8.67 mile long cement highway segment from Murrieta to the foot of the Temecula grade for \$28,010.30.

The highway construction crew had laid six miles of concrete by October. While in Temecula, John McNeill met and befriended Al Knott, the town's blacksmith.

"John could take care of sharpening plow points, picks and crowbars in his portable shop, but when it became necessary for him to shrink a set of wagon tires, or do other heavy iron work, he brought the job to Al's blacksmith shop and usually worked nights to avoid in-

terference with Al's regular daytime business. The men became good friends and Al typically refused to charge John for the use of his shop and equipment." (The Last Thirteen Steps by Tom Hudson and Sam Hicks, The High Country, VL. 42)

In November, the crew camped once again in Murrieta. At the end of the month the highway paving project was completed. The Connors Construction Company then moved their camp to the foot of the Jackrabbit Trail to pave the county road from Moreno to Beaumont, but John McNeill did not join them.

In December 1915, while John was in Murrieta, he learned that J. J. White and his family were moving back to Los Angeles. White was selling his blacksmith shop located at the corner of A Street and Washington Avenue. This business opportunity allowed John to establish a permanent residence for him and his new bride.

John McNeill's wife, Melva Mabel Martin was born about 1886 in Jamestown, Cloud County, Kansas. She was the daughter of John W. and Elizabeth Martin. The Martin children were Flora B. (1871), William Edgar (1880), Melva (1886), Minnie (1890), Joseph Clarence (1893), and Mima P. (1895). The Martin family moved to Orange County, California after 1900. John Martin died before 1910 and may have

been laid to rest in an unmarked grave in the Santa Ana Cemetery.

John McNeill and Melva Martin were married possibly in Orange County. Their first daughter, Elizabeth, was born January 7, 1917 in Murrieta. After their daughter's birth, their friends, Al and Freda Knott of Temecula, visited the McNeills to see the new family member. The Knotts were also new parents with the birth of their twins, Vernon and Vera in 1916.

When America declared war on Germany in April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson ordered all German immigrants to immediately surrender their firearms as a demonstration of their loyalty. Riverside County Sheriff Wilson deputized men to gather the guns throughout the area and turn them in at the sheriff's office in Riverside.

Murrieta had a small population of German immigrants, most of whom worked at the Guenther's Murrieta Hot Springs Resort. John McNeill was deputized and was asked to confiscate the German residents' guns. McNeill faced challenges as he requested their firearms.

"Deputy John McNeil has seized several fire arms from incompetent persons since the publication of the proclamation by the president dated April 6, 1917. (Source: May 4, 1917, Lake Elsinore Valley Press)

In October 1917, John McNeill was offered a black-

smith position in Huntington Beach, California. It would have given Melva a chance to live near her mother and siblings again. McNeill sold the Murrieta blacksmith shop and moved to Orange County. A year later Melva's mother died.

Between 1918 and 1930, John McNeill and his family lived in San Dimas, California where John continued to make a living as a blacksmith. John and Melva had four children, Elizabeth Jane (1917), John Robert (1919), Dorothy M. (1920), and Clara Alberta (1923).

In the early 1930s, the McNeills moved to Temecula and rented a home on Pujol Street. Then John rented Al Knott's blacksmith shop for \$36 a month. It is unclear if McNeill was reinstated as a deputy when he returned to the area.

Times were changing and the services of a blacksmith were declining. With little business, John found it more and more difficult to financially care for his family. Then on August 13, 1936, John came home around noon and began arguing with Melva over their insurance policy. He lost his temper and clubbed his wife insensible using rollers from a washing machine wringer. She suffered a fractured skull, three fractured ribs and numerous bruises and contusions.

Around 1:00 p.m. their seventeen year old son, John R. McNeill, was walking home for lunch from his job at the local



John McNeill, 1936

Source: Ancestry.com

grocery store when he encountered his father. He was told by his father that someone had hit his mother. Young John went in the house and discovered his unconscious mother lying on the kitchen floor. He immediately called the county sheriff and the county ambulance at Elsinore. Shortly afterwards his father also called the sheriff and declared a murder had been committed. When the boy looked at his father for answers, he noticed a drop of blood on his father's glasses.

When authorities arrived on the scene, the blacksmith stated that he had come home and found his wife beaten by robbers. Melva and her son arrived by ambulance at the county hospital around 3:30 p.m. The doctors examined her, but the injuries were too severe. Before she breathed her last breathe, she whispered to her son that his fa-



A road crew is laying cement on Front Street in Temecula in 1915 as a part of the Inland Highway construction project. (Source: The Gene Knott collection)

ther had committed the crime. She died at 7:45 p.m. and later was laid to rest in Fairhaven Memorial Park in Santa Ana, California.

Investigators began looking for clues at the crime scene. The bloody wringer was found hidden in a box on the back porch. A stray dog led them to a rabbit hutch behind the house. There they found buried underneath the hutch McNeill's bloody clothing. McNeill was arrested and taken to the county jail. At the court trial the jury found him guilty and sentenced him the death penalty.

When he arrived at San Quentin, authorities learned that it was his second visit. In 1908, he was known as Daniel

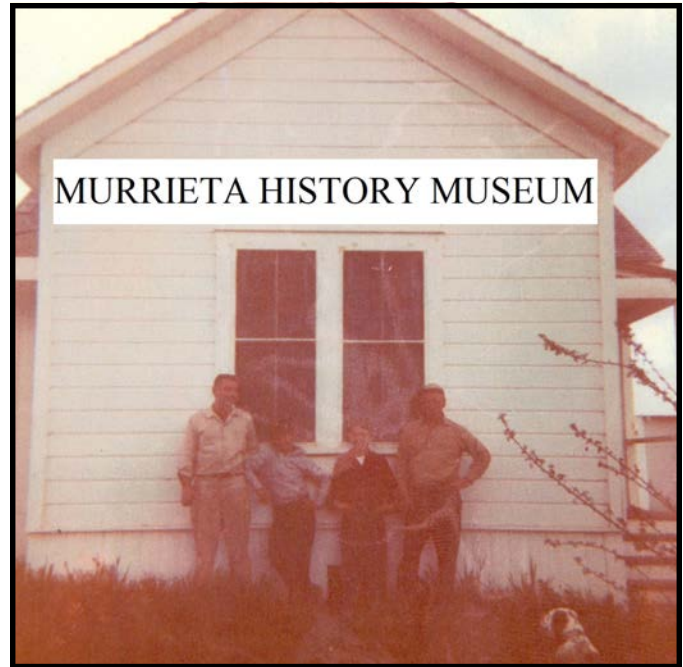
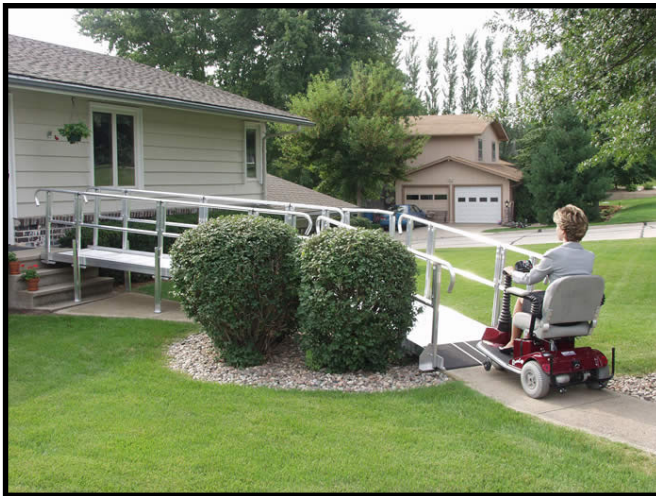
McMaster. He was sentenced to prison for two years for forgery. He was later paroled, and when he violated his parole, officers couldn't find him. It is unknown whether Daniel McMaster or John McNeill was his real name.

On July 9, 1937, John McNeill climbed the thirteen steps to the prison gallows and was hung for murdering his wife. His body was buried in an unmarked grave in the prison cemetery.

Two months later, his daughter, Elizabeth, married George Willard Wright on September 4, 1937, in Orange County, California. Her two younger sisters, Dorothy and Clara, lived with Elizabeth, and her husband, George until they

were old enough to live on their own. Their brother, John Robert McNeill, left Temecula and joined the Navy. On November 16, 1944, John and 82 crew members lost their lives when the Japanese bombed and sunk their submarine, the USS Scamp (SS-277). Elizabeth J. Wright, the last of the McNeill family, died on April 7, 2004 and was laid to rest in Phoenix, Arizona.

Today, John McNeill's murderous tale has become a part of Old Town Temecula's lore. However, it is important to remember that the tale first began not in Temecula, but in a Murrieta blacksmith shop.



\$8,000 Donation Goal

The Society needs an estimated \$8,000 to install a new access ramp to the museum. The museum cannot open until the ramp is installed.

Donations can be made through our Go Fund Me page. If you are a business owner and you would like to sponsor or contribute to the project, please contact us.

Thank you for supporting our City's heritage.

If you have an questions or suggestions please let us know. Phone: 951-387-4862



<https://www.gofundme.com/murrietamuseum>



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Next Monthly Board Meeting:

Monday, April 2, 2018 at 5:30 p.m.

Honeycutt Farms Family Restaurant

40477 Murrieta Hot Springs Road, D2

(In the Alta Murrieta Shopping Center)

All members welcome to attend

MURRIETA FIRE: A BRIEF HISTORY



Murrieta Valley Historical Society and retired Murrieta Fire Deputy Chief, Historian, and Murrieta Native Pat Jennings, in partnership with the Murrieta Public Library.

Monday, March 12th, 2018 | 6 PM

Murrieta Public Library, 8 Town Square



MURRIETA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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