

Schmidt / McDonald Ranch House Historical Background Family Histories



Trinity Site's Schmidt / McDonald Ranch House

Prior to World War II, the Trinity Site area with its two McDonald brothers ranch houses was obscure New Mexico ranch land noted mainly for being part of the Jornada Del Muerto. After the Manhattan Project, often called the world's best kept secret, exploded the world's first atomic here on July 16, 1945 Trinity Site became synonymous with the birth of the Atomic Age.

In addition to Ground Zero, the area includes both the George and Dave McDonald ranch houses. The plutonium core to the bomb was assembled at George's house and the Dave McDonald ranch served as base camp for the scientists, technicians and support personnel.

When Maj. Gen. Niles Fulwyler took command of White Sands in 1982, he visited the National Historic Landmark and found the houses coming apart. He immediately initiated efforts to reverse the deterioration. Using White Sands Missile Range resources the house was quickly stabilized. He then arranged a partnership with the Department of Energy and the National Park Service to see about restoring George's house. In the end, the Department of Energy and U.S. Army provided funds for the Park Service experts to do a restoration. The work was done during 1984. All efforts were directed at making the house appear as it did on July 12 and 13, 1945.

The George McDonald ranch was originally established by the Schmidt family. The Schmidt's first house was a mile to the west. When it burned down, Franz Schmidt had the current house built in 1913. This is why the house is often referred to as the Schmidt/McDonald home.

The home site encompasses about three acres and consists of the house and various outbuildings. The house originally consisted of just four rooms but every room had an outside door just in case of another fire. Sometime in the 1930 the McDonalds added the stone addition on the north. This was a bedroom and a bathroom complete with a tub and toilet. They drained into a cesspool beside the house. The 1,750-square-foot house is built of adobe which was stuccoed on the outside and plastered on the inside.

For restoration of the house, much of the stucco had to be replaced. A photo of a soldier on the porch in July 1945 clearly shows a small section of stucco missing. Since the restoration was to bring the house to what it looked like in July 1945 that stucco was left off the adobe bricks.

On the west side of the house is an ice house and cellar along with an underground cistern that stored rain water coming off the tin roof. Gutters collected the water and piped it through a box of carbon particles before draining into the cistern. Also on the west is the tower for a wind generator the McDonalds installed to charge batteries they stored in the cellar. The wiring for lights is still in the house.

To the east is a large, divided water storage tank and a Chicago Aeromotor windmill. The scientists and support people used the north tank as a swimming pool during the long hot summer of 1945. South of the windmill are the remains of a bunkhouse and a barn which was part garage. Further to the east are corrals and holding pens. These corrals were originally built by the Schmidts so they were designed to accommodate both cattle and sheep. The buildings and fixtures east of the house have been stabilized to prevent further deterioration.

The McDonald family was forced to leave the ranch at the beginning of 1942 when the Alamogordo Bombing Range was established for training World War II bombing

crews. The house stood empty until the Manhattan Project arrived in early 1945. At the ranch house they built a ramp from the gate onto the front porch which was used for moving equipment and crates into the house. A support frame was built at the gate to be used in unloading trucks but,



according to scientists who visited later, was never used.

The northeast room, the Schmidt's master bedroom, was designated the assembly room. Work benches and tables were installed. Scientists wanted the room to act as a "clean room" so the windows were sealed with plastic and the cracks and corners in the room were taped over. Before the restoration, small patches of tape and plastic were still present in the room.

The core was composed of the initiator, made of polonium and beryllium, the two plutonium hemispheres and a heavy plug of uranium. After assembly it was taken to Ground Zero where it was placed in the bomb assembly.

The explosion did not significantly damage the house. Most of the windows were blown out, but the main structure was intact. Decades of rain water dripping through holes in the roof did much more damage. The barn did not do as well. The roof was bowed inward and some of the tin roofing was blown away. The roof has since collapsed.

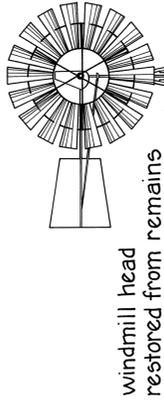
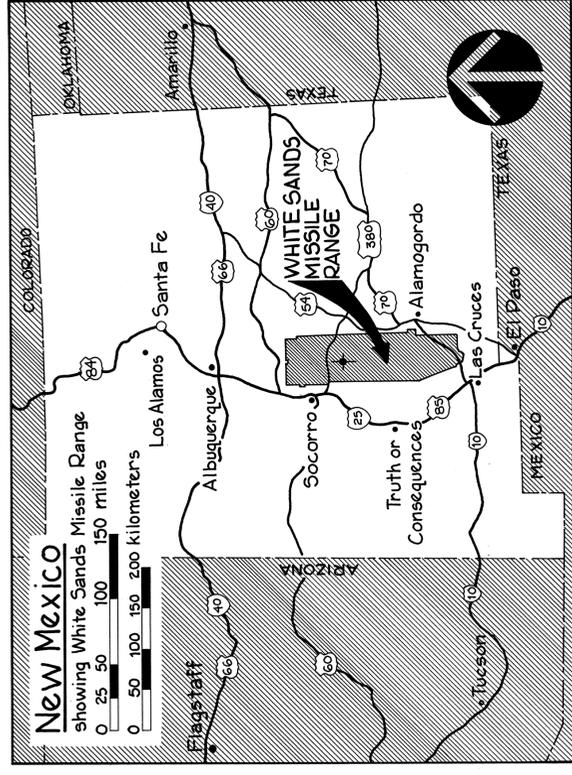
**Historic American Engineering
Record (HAER) Drawings**

1983

MCDONALD

RANCH AT

TRINITY SITE



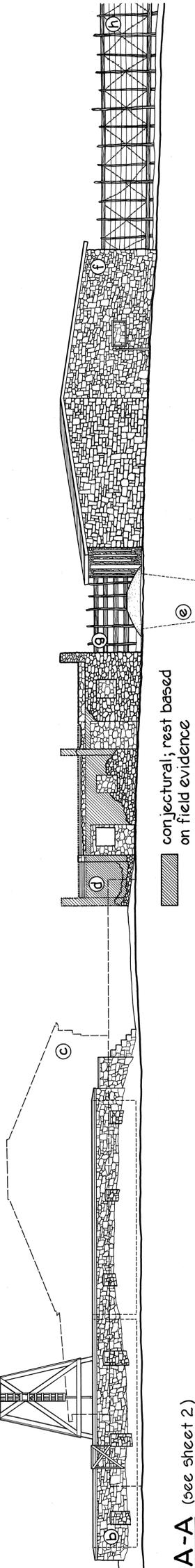
The George McDonald Ranch House, located west of the Oscura Mountains on the White Sands Missile Range, was the site of the final assembly of the plutonium core for the world's first atomic bomb. Code named "Fat Man", the bomb was detonated on July 16, 1945 at Trinity Site, approximately two miles north-northwest of the ranch house. Members of the nuclear assembly team, led by Robert Bacher and Marshall Holloway and assisted by Louis Slotin, assembled the core components on July 13 in the northeast room of the ranch house. Others present included Brigadier General Thomas Farrell, deputy director of the Manhattan Project; Doctor J. Robert Oppenheimer, director of Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, and Commander Norris Bradbury, who directed the overall bomb assembly process.

The ranch house and its outbuildings are typical of ranches of the early to mid-20th century in this area of New Mexico. Constructed in stages, the ranch house was built as a one-story adobe structure with a later stone addition, a semi-detached ice house, and a wood porch (since rebuilt). It is surrounded by a low stone wall. The outbuildings are of adobe and stone construction. A Chicago Aeromotor windmill supplied water to two large above-ground concrete reservoirs. Adjacent to the ranch buildings are the remains of several wood and wire-fenced corrals.

This recording project is part of a program initiated through a memorandum of agreement between the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of the Army. The program has two components: an inventory of architectural and engineering resources and the development of archeological overviews for 74 DARCOM installations. Stanley H. Fried, Chief, Real Estate Branch of Headquarters DARCOM, directed the program for the army. Dr. Robert J. Kapsch, Chief of the Historic American Buildings

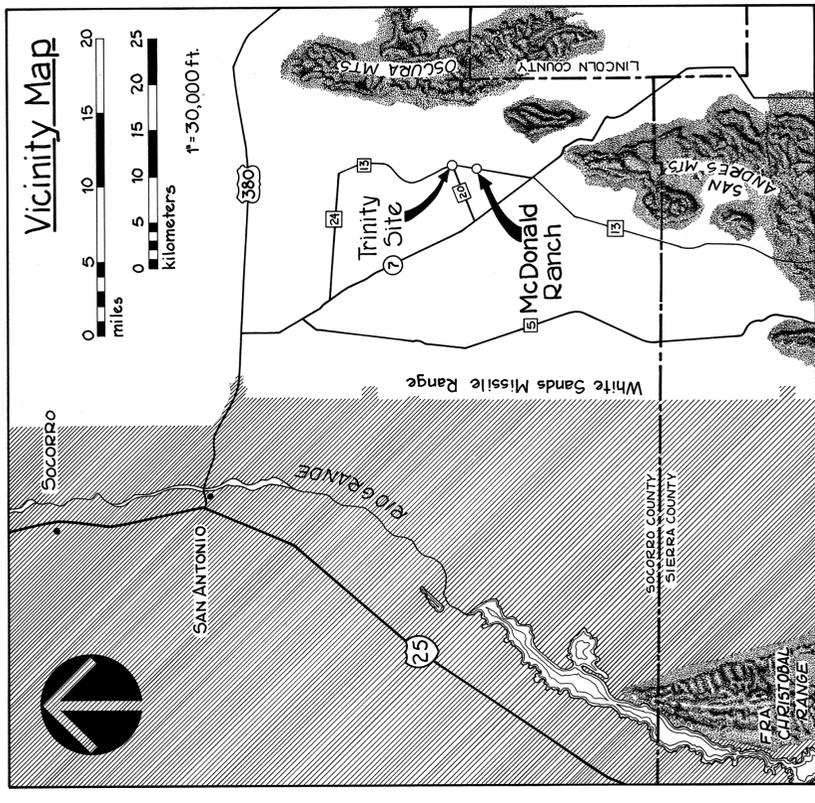
Site Section A-A (see sheet 2)

bench mark at 5038 feet above sea level



- Ⓐ WINDMILL - 27' wood tower, 14' at base, 7' diam. head (Chicago Aeromotor) shown reconstructed
- Ⓑ RESERVOIR - 65' x 20' x 6' deep, 2 compartments, rubble rock and cement
- Ⓒ PROFILE - ranch house, west elev.
- Ⓓ BUNKHOUSE - 35' x 26' rubble rock with adobe mortar, shown with walls reconstructed (presently in state of ruin, roof absent)
- Ⓔ CISTERN - 9' diam x 10' deep, cement
- Ⓕ BARN and GARAGE - 41' x 71', built in stages, rubble rock, adobe mortar
- Ⓖ 7' FENCES - two types shown are predominant on site

All listed dimensions rounded to nearest foot. Maps this page adapted from the Official Road Map of the White Sands Missile Range, 1981.



TRINITY SITE

NEAR INTERSECTION OF WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE ROUTES 13 AND 20
SOCORRO COUNTY
NEW MEXICO

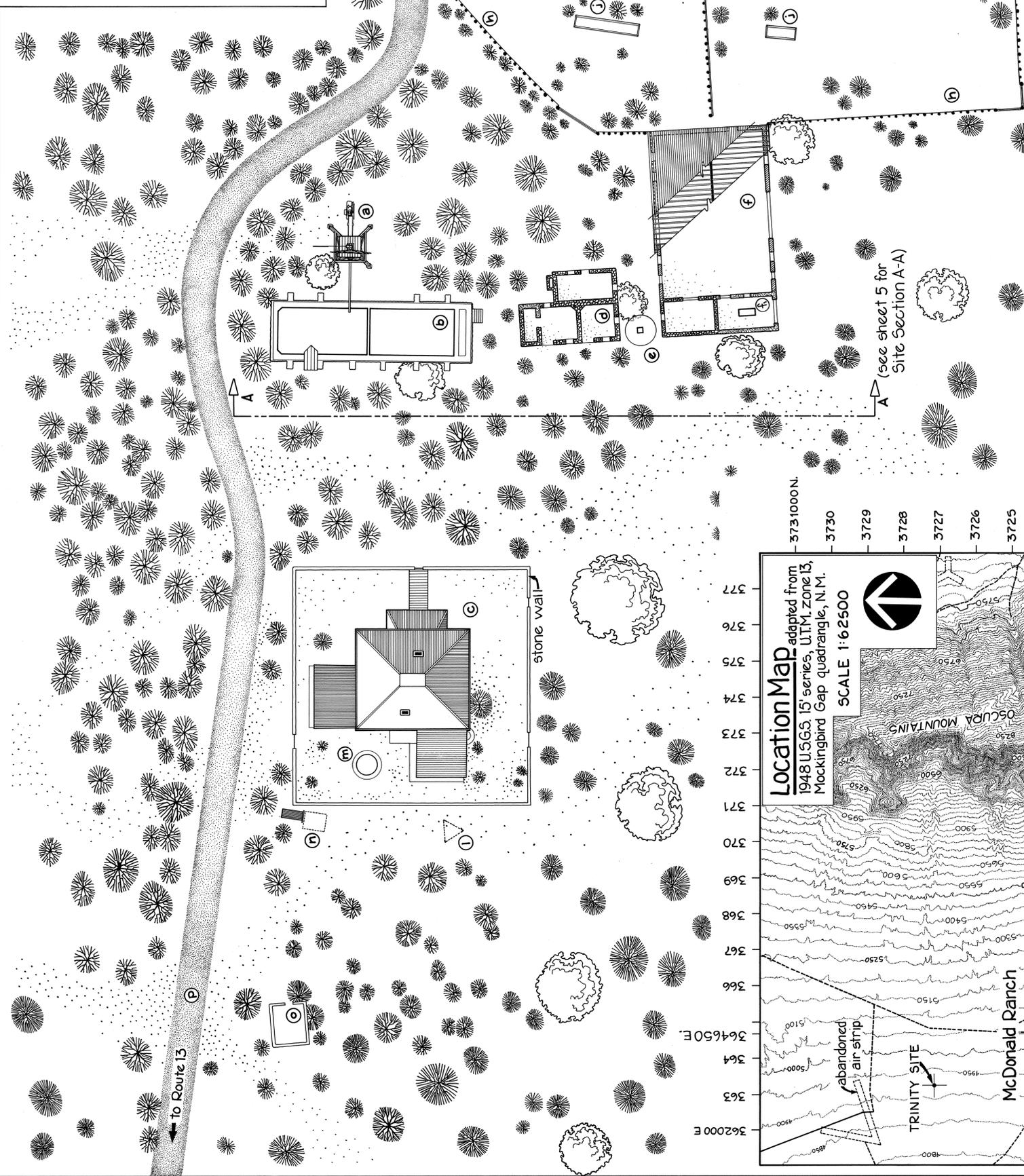
HISTORIC AMERICAN
ENGINEERING RECORD
NM-1-A

SHEET
5 OF 11

DELIMITED BY: Marian Domproski, 1983
DARCOM RECORDING PROJECT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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- ① WINDMILL - Chicago Aeromotor mill, Fairbanks and Morse stationary engine with pump jack (missing) on walking beam, tower timbers 10'x10"
- ② RESERVOIR - 2 compartments, ea. 16x30'
- ③ RANCH HOUSE - surrounded by 340' x1' x4' rock and concrete wall
- ④ BUNKHOUSE - floor plan shows rock and concrete, rock and adobe mortar walls
- ⑤ CISTERN - 2' x 2' opening
- ⑥ BARN AND GARAGE - floor plan shows 3 wall types:
 - rock with adobe mortar
 - rock with concrete mortar
 - flat stone, squared ceiling beams and roof boards shown cut away, pit in garage 3' deep
- ⑦ HOLDING PEN FENCE - board and log poles at 5' intervals
- ⑧ CORRAL FENCE - board, log, and wire poles at 6' intervals
- ⑨ FENCE - constructed using reclaimed materials
- ⑩ WATER TROUGH - metal with concrete foundation
- ⑪ SHED - 7' x 10' corrugated iron
- ⑫ WINDMILL - steel tower, only baserites remain, 7x7x7', listed as 14' high
- ⑬ CISTERN - cover missing, 7 diam, 9' deep
- ⑭ ROOT CELLAR - 6x7' with concrete walls, dirt floor 7' below ground level, dirt and board ceiling, corrugated iron door
- ⑮ RUINS - 12' x 15' low stone wall with opening, function unknown
- ⑯ DRIVEWAY - graded, unpaved



Site Plan, McDonald Ranch

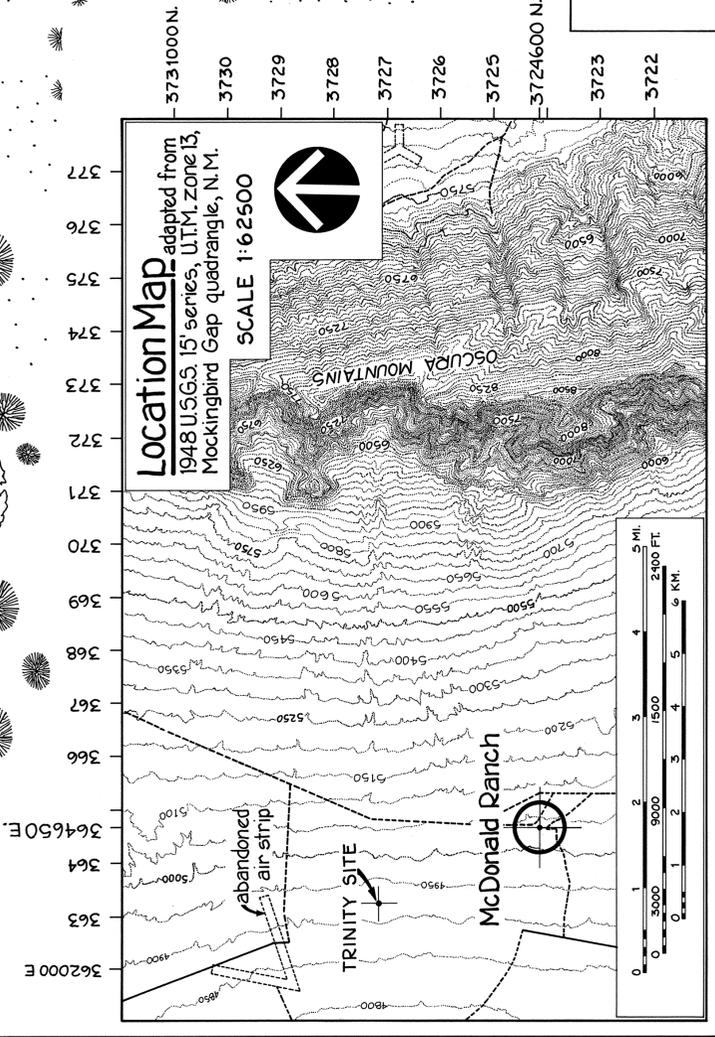
CREOSOTE BUSH (Larrea Species)

MESQUITE TREE (Prosopis glandulosa)

Scale: 1" = 20'-0"

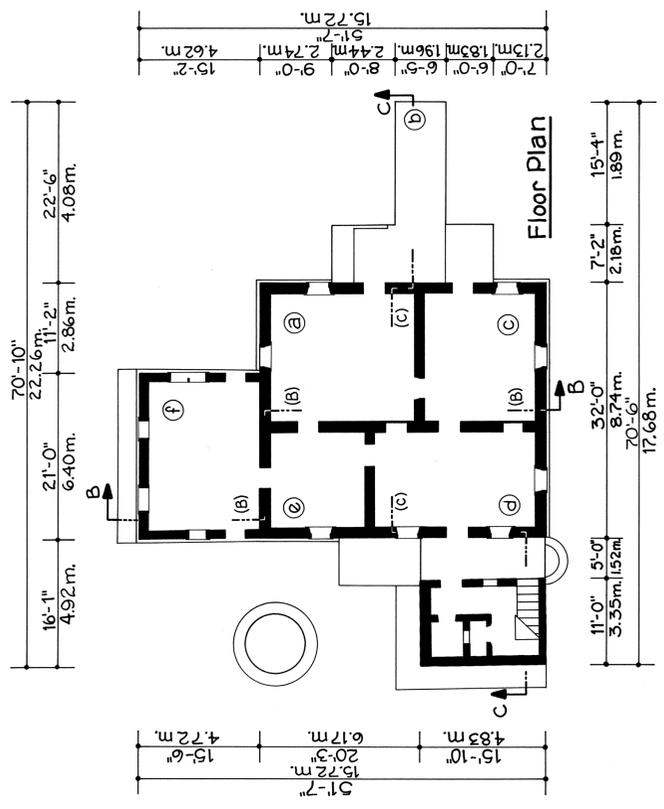
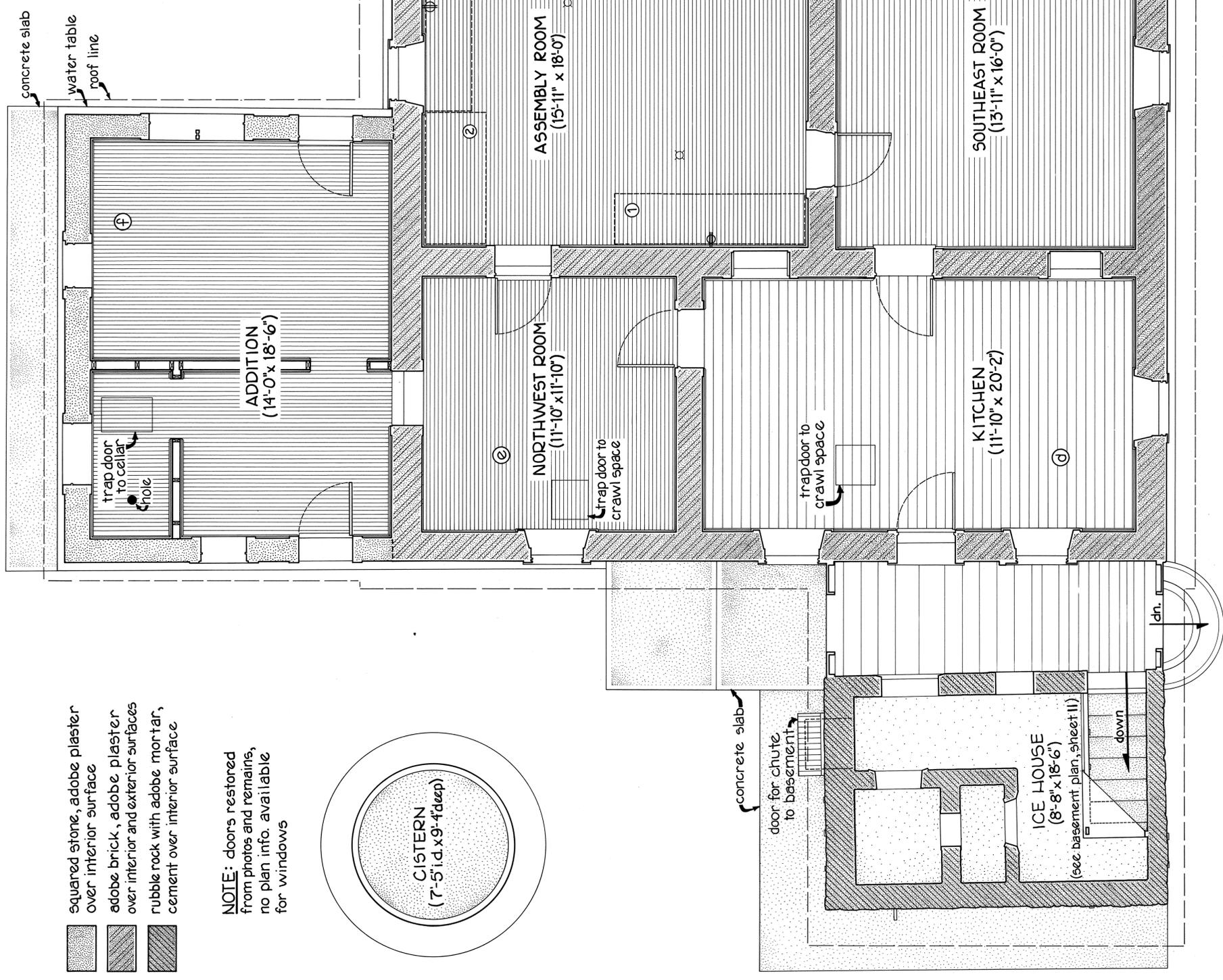
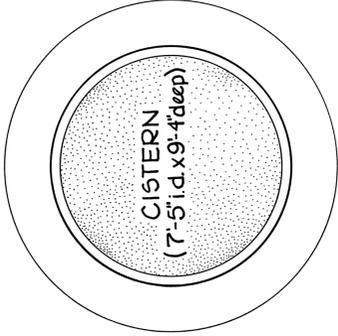
Scale: 1:240 meters

Structures located by survey. Vegetation placed using aerial photos taken February, 1983. Structures identified in part from real estate documents dated 1944 and 1952. Listed dimensions rounded to nearest foot.



-  squared stone, adobe plaster over interior surface
-  adobe brick, adobe plaster over interior and exterior surfaces
-  rubble rock with adobe mortar, cement over interior surface

NOTE: doors restored from photos and remains, no plan info. available for windows



Assembly Room modified in 1945 as follows:

- ① BENCH-9'-6" x 2'-3" x 3'-4" high
- ② CLOSET-present prior to assembly
- ③ RAMP-1'-3" x 2'-6" x 0'-2"
- ⊙ SWITCH-pullcord for 100 watt bulb
- ⊙ OUTLET-4 plug, 110 volts A.C.

(equipment later removed, information obtained from archives at Los Alamos Scientific Laboratories, Los Alamos, New Mexico)

Floor Plan, McDonald Ranch House



DELIMITED BY: Marian Dombroski, 1983
 DARCOM RECORDING PROJECT
 HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
 UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

TRINITY SITE
 NEAR INTERSECTION OF WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE ROUTES 13 AND 20
 SOCORRO COUNTY
 NEW MEXICO

SHEET 7 OF 11
 HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
 NM-1-A

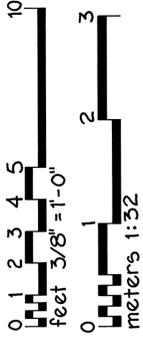
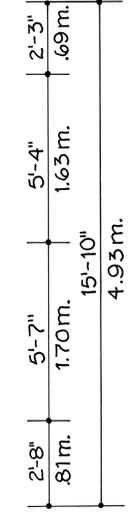
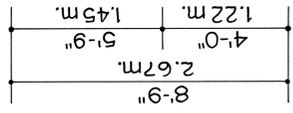
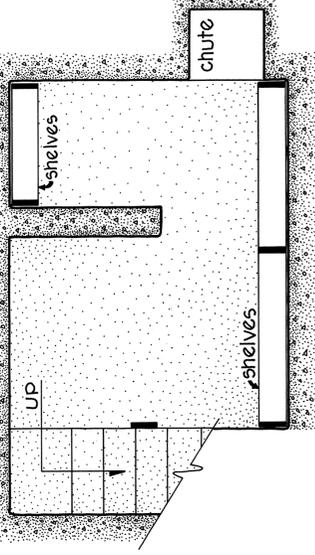
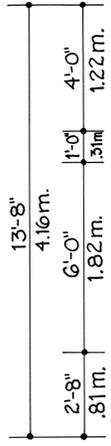
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TRIM LINE

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Ice House Basement Plan,
McDonald Ranch House

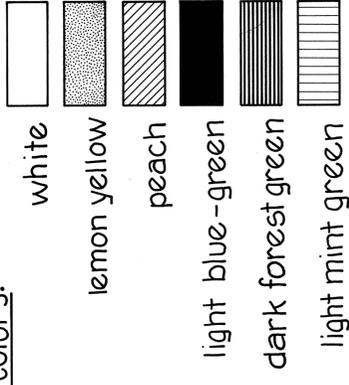
(see sheets 7 & 10)



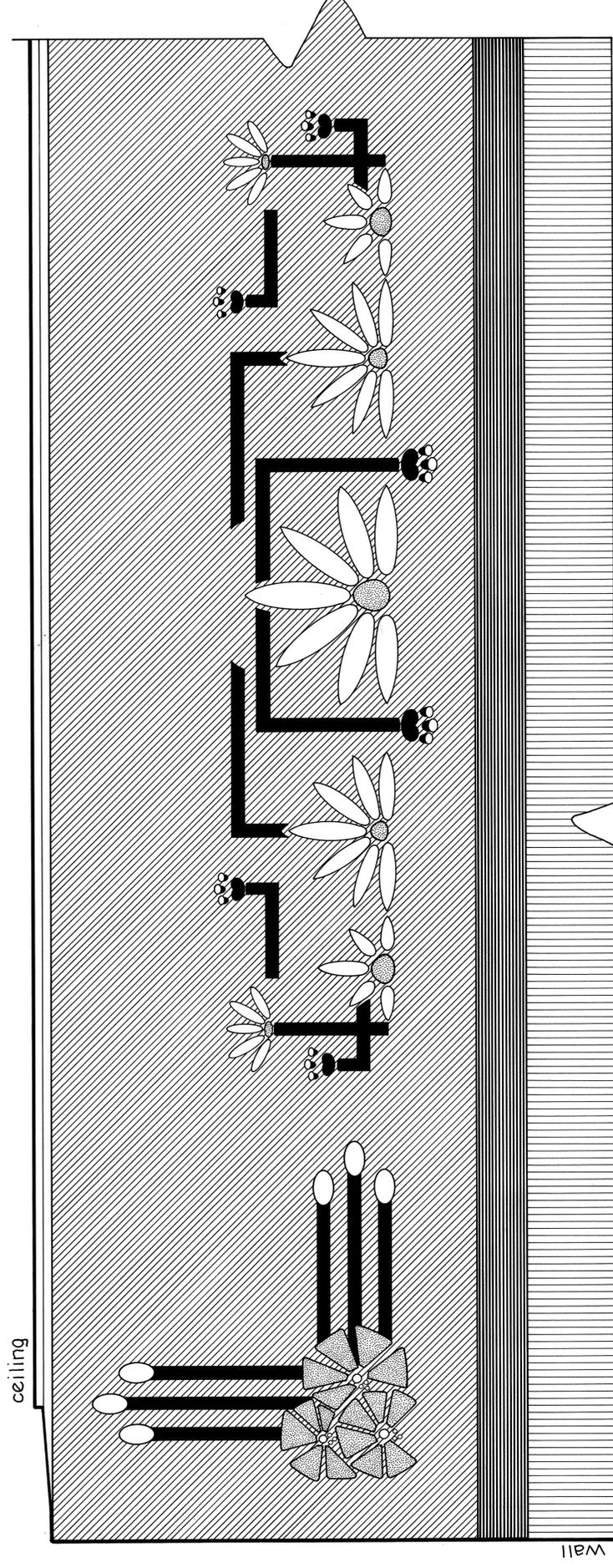
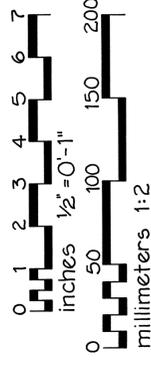
Detail "D"- Border Stencil,
McDonald Ranch House

(see Southeast Room, sheets 7 & 10)

Stencil and wall colors:



Scale:



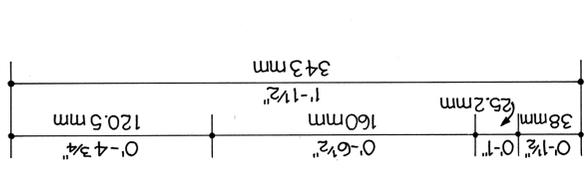
CORNER PATTERN



REPEATED BORDER PATTERN



NEXT REPEAT



Schmidt / McDonald Ranch House

Historical Background

Family Letters

**Article from *Albuquerque Journal*
*Magazine***

1987

IT'S REALLY THE SCHMIDT RANCH

Franz Schmidt immigrated to the United States through Ellis Island at the age of 17. The young German moved west where he eventually met Esther Holmes of Pearsall, Texas. They were married in 1906.

The Schmidt family moved into New Mexico, which was still a territory, and established a ranch here under the Oscura Mountains. To build the ranch some of the land was homesteaded while some was purchased. The family's original home was about a mile from this house. The original house burned down when Esther was in town having her second child.

While this house was being built in 1913 the family lived in the barn at the original homesite. They moved in here in the fall—the oldest daughter thinks it was September of 1913.

According to granddaughter Rosemary Hall, “The house was adobe with pebble dash outside walls. The inside walls were smooth plaster. Floors were of wood. On the front were concrete half circle steps (now covered by the wood platform built by the Manhattan Project). The roof was tin with 18” anchor bolts into the adobe walls. This was because of the high winds. The north side of the house had a filter with charcoal to purify the water from the roof, as it went into the cistern for storage. The cellar was part ice house. Ice was cut from the water tanks during the winter. At this time there was no electricity or plumbing, only an outhouse.”

There were three Schmidt children—Frances, Thomas and Margaret. Frances is the oldest child and the mother of Rosemary Hall. Together Frances and Rosemary wrote the missile range a short history of their family living in this house. They described it in great detail.

For instance, the kitchen was painted pale gray and had a Magic Chef range for cooking. For light the kitchen had two kerosene lamps with reflectors. The southeast room was their living room which was painted tan or a “pink/peach color.” The assembly room was the master bedroom and was painted pale green. The northwest room was painted blue and belonged to Frances—the two younger children slept with their parents.

They describe the ceilings as “drop ceilings.” By this they mean the ceilings were painted a cream color which was extended about 18 inches down the wall. This was separated from the wall color by a strip of wood or scroll work like that found in the living room. The scroll was painted by Mike Walsh, a ranch hand who had come from Chicago seeking relief from his tuberculosis. He was also in charge of the family’s car which was the first car in the area. He lived in a room at the end of the garage/barn.

They planted cottonwood trees in front of the house and zinnias on the south side. Frances says her job as a little girl was to keep the flowers watered. There was also a garden between the house and the water tanks.

The bunkhouse was occupied by Esther's brother, Frank Holmes, and a Norwegian stonemason, John Finago. Finago did the stone work you see around the ranch. Part of the bunkhouse was also used to store groceries and supplies.

Supplies were brought to the ranch twice a year by wagon. Wood for heating and cooking was cut in the mountains and hauled back to the ranch by wagon. The woodpile was next to the water tanks. In addition to the cooking stove in the kitchen there was a pot belly stove in the living room.

According to the family this was a working ranch with over 12,000 sheep and about 1,000 cattle. The sheep were divided into six small

herds, each with a herder and a dog. The shearing was done in the barn and the wool then sold in town or to buyers from back East. Frances says the bales of wool were great fun to play on as a child.

The ranch extended well beyond the immediate area. The family had a house similar to this one at Hansonburg Hills which is about six miles north of here. They also had land as far south as Mockingbird Gap.

The ranch was eventually sold to a Mr. Synder because of the failing health of Franz Schmidt.

The history of the ranch is not very clear after this. Sometime in the 1930's the ranch was apparently purchased by George McDonald, the last owner of the place before the government took over the land.

Mr. Jim Eckles or
Don Montoya

Dear Sirs.

We received the pictures of
the McDonald Ranch at Trinity
that you gave to Don McClenagan.
we will never be able to thank
you enough for them. You see
my father had that house built
I would say the first part of 1913
my sister was born in July
and was a small baby when
we moved in -- it would have
in the fall -- mama and I walked
behind the wagon picking Black
eye Sarsys (fall flowers).
You don't know how happy it
makes me to know the place
will be taken care of -- Thank
Mr. Tulinger for us -- wish
we could thank him in person.

the ranch will always be home
to me -- to think of all that has
happened there -- July 16 is Marnas
birthday -- the house was built
by an old Norwegian stone mason
daddy picked up of the streets and
gave a home the rest of his life --
he is buried on a hill out there
the painting and scroll work on the
borders was done by a man from
Chicago who came to N. Mex. dying
with T.B. -- he lived with us and
got strong and well -- he also cared
for the car -- the first on the flats -- that
is why the garage and the grease pit --
it made it easier to get under
the car and turn down grease cups
and things -- it also was a fine place
to play -- the barn was used mostly
for shearing -- wool sacks were nice
to play on too if we didn't get caught
The water tanks were for watering
the sheep and a garden between
the yard fence

Believe it we had flowers in the yard
Zinnias all along the south wall
that was my job to water.. In the
house the room used for assembly was
mamas and daddy bed room -- mine
was the smaller one.. the other front
room was the living room -- then
the kitchen and dining room opened
to the back and the ice room with
a pass through into a small room
for keeping milk and things and the
cellar underneath.. what memories
this all brings. Daddy was a German
boy that came to this country and
mama was a farm girl from Texas and
were only trying to make a home. His name
was Franz Schmidt. He also had a brother
here -- he had a ranch on the flats west
of Mocking Bird Gap -- we owned that
too wonder what happened to the well
and tank there -- there was a small
wooden house there -- it had been
a Post office called Murry at one time
north of the ranch we had another

house built by the same old man
at Hansonburg Hills -- old John
was living there when he died --
we can't thank you enough for the
pictures and restoring the place.

Wonder what happened to a big
rock on the mountain in front
of the house? it was a big shaft of
red or pink granite sticking straight
up out of the side of the mountain.
my daughter has written a
more complete letter - but I just
wanted to thank all of you -- we
didn't have pictures of that home
didn't have a camera at that time
later we have some pictures of
the place at Hansonburg.

Thank all of you again
Frances Hall

Dear Sir:

The house at Trinity Site was built between late 1912 & early 1913. My Grandfather & Grandmother moved into it around August or September of 1913. The house was adobe with pebble dash outside walls. The inside walls were smooth plaster. Floors were of wood. On the front were concrete half circle steps. The roof was tin with 18" anchor bolts into the adobe walls. This was because of the high winds & to prevent it from being pulled off. The north side of the house had a filter with charcoal to purify the water from the roof, as it went into the cistern for storage. The cellar was part ice house. Ice was cut from the water tanks during the winter. At this time, there was no electricity or plumbing. Only an outhouse. This was located at the rear of the house marked "root cellar".

The Ice House area was joined to the house by an open breezeway, roofed but no doors on either end. The steps were half circle also. There was a cellar located under the ice house.

The kitchen / dining room was painted pale gray. This is in the right place. There was a magic Chef wood range for cooking.

The "southeast room" was the living room. It was either tan or a pink / peach color. The "assembly room" was my grandparents bedroom. It was pale green.

The "northwest room" was my mother's room. It was blue. The two younger children slept in my grandparents room, because one was ill at times; one a baby.

The living room had a stove on the style of a pot belly stove. It had eisenglass door; a chrome rail at the bottom. You could prop your feet up on this.

There were 2 kerosene lamps in the kitchen with reflectors for light. Other lamps were silver colored with green glass shades, also a rayovac lamp that used a mantel (wick). The pot belly stove had a chrome on top.

My mother doesn't remember the trap doors in the "northwest room" or in the kitchen. There were young cottonwood trees in a row at the front of the house. A zinnia bed was at the south side

of the house, a garden was between the house; the water tanks. (you call this a reservoir). The garden was watered from the water tank. There were two valves on the water tank, one for the garden.

One on the opposite side for the shop water trough. The windmill at the water tank was where my grandmother hung meat wrapped in a sheet. This was before the ice house was finished. Animals couldn't get to the meat there.

The bunkhouse was a small tool/stack room, a room for my grandmother's brother Frank Holmes; Mr. John Finag (not sure of the spelling). The room on the back of it was a storeroom for groceries; other supplies.

The barn; garage was a garage with work pit; the room at the end of the garage belonged to

mike Walsh. The ^{III} barn was for shearing shop & stacking of wool bags. There was also a hack & a wagon. The lankhouse & barn also had tin roove those were to catch rainwater because water was scarce. Snow was also used to fill the cisterns, the long water trough was for sheep & the short one for horses.

The driveway was on the south side of the house, so you could leave car at the garage.

The ceilings in the house were cream color with drop ceiling (drop 18" from ceiling in same cream color). The ceiling color & main wall color were divided by a stencil scroll border. The main scroll was in the corners. This was done by Mike Walsh. He was from Chicago & was buried in Albuquerque, N. Mexico, by my grandparents. He had care of the car & drove it, among other jobs at the ranch.

John Finago was a Norwegian Stone mason, who did the fence & other stone work here & the Hansonburg Hills house. This was also part of the ranch, as was Mockingbird Gap. The grave of John Finago is on a hill close to the house.

The adobe used for the house was made right next to the house. We guess the pit has filled in ~~at~~ over the years. The windows were light pane glass.

The original homestead & house was one mile down range. It was burned when my grand-mother was in town for the arrival of her

second baby. The ^{IV} family lived in the barn there with a fireplace for cooking. This was added on. The house at Trinity Site was then built. There were two large storage tanks for filling the concrete dipping vat at the homestead site. Also a well & pump.

Four wagons of groceries & supplies were brought to the ranch twice a year. Jean Val Jean owned the freightline that delivered them. He was from San Marcial, N. Mexico. Two wagons were hooked together & pulled by six mules.

Wood for heating & cooking was cut in the mountains & hauled to the ranch by wagon. The woodpile was at the water tanks.

This was a working ranch of over 12,000 head of sheep. Six herds of 2,000 plus sheep were worked. Each had a header & usually a dog. One was a Scotsman called George & his dog Mary. The wool was sold in New York. The buyers came at shearing time, to the ranch or sometimes in town.

Over 1,000 head of cattle were here also. My grandfather brought the first two purebred bulls to New Mexico. One was a Shorthorn & the other a Roan shorthorn or white face Hereford. The cows were common Chihuahua cattle.

The first car was here at the ranch. It was a Dodge (1913 or 1914).

At the barns was a ^v trap gate. You could lift the lower part for sheep to come through but not the horses. They watered at the long trough in the corral. This was at the home ranch. (Trinity site.)

The ranch was sold because of my grandfather's health beginning to fail. It was sold to a Mr. Snyder then later on to Mr. Donald. I don't know if the name can be changed but in reality, my grandparents were the original owners & builders. Some was homesteaded & a part of it bought. This should show on the old records. It should be called the Schmidt Ranch. It was still the Territory of New Mexico at this time.

My grandfather came through Ellis Island at the age of 17. He was born Franz Schmidt in Plich, Rhein Prussia (now German). He became an American citizen. My grandmother was Esther Holmes from Pearsall, Texas. They were married in 1906 & had three children. Frances (my mother), Thomas & Margaret.

I hope this helps some. My mother is so proud you cared enough to preserve & restore her home. You will never know how much the picture & information, you sent, mean to her. If you want to talk to her in person, we are only about 50 miles north of Elgin Air Force Base. Enclosed is some information related to the area & some pictures. Any questions, just ask. Please advise before printing any of this information, so

we are aware of it ^{VI} & would like a copy. Are you
* going to restore the other out buildings? As a
matter of trivia, the bomb was tested on my
grandmother's birthday.

* Could you provide some information on a
red granite (?) shaft? when you stood at the
front door (at Trinity site) it was straight ahead
on the mountain side. It looked similar to
the Washington monument but flat on top.
People that looked down on it said the top
might have a hollow because it held water
after a rain. It could not be climbed because
it was straight & slick.

There was also a rock house built at
Hansburg Hills at the same time or just after
the house at Trinity site. It was also built by
John Finago, same design but smaller & no ice
house. It was used mainly as a bunkhouse
by my grandfather & John Finago or whatever crew
was working the stock. This was about six
miles from the home ranch. There were two
metal tanks for water plus the earth water
tank.

At Mockingbird Gap there was a wood house,
one room frame, used a home for my great-grand-
mother. Prior to this, before 1900 it was a
post office called Murray (?) officially listed as
a Post Office. Messages & mail were left &
people checked for mail as they rode by. Some-
times delivering mail to people if they were
going that way. There was a steel windmill

that pumped water ^{up} into a large iron runs. There should have been a spring here because the wagon trains crossed here in the 1800's. If they didn't get water here, they were in trouble because of the distance to the next water. The Indians plugged all the springs in the mountains with rocks: cedar bark. The trains could be ambushed before reaching the Gap. On the east side hubs from burned trains could be seen on the prairie, when my mother was a child. It was thirty five miles to the river for the next water, for example, depending on which way they were headed.

There was a place called Mills Tank inside the Gap behind Mockingbird Gap. (East of Mockingbird Gap behind the mountain point this was used a water tank for the stock. The Indian ambushes at the Gap is where the name "Valley of Death" or Jornada Del Muerto originated.

Please return the photos as they cannot be replaced.

Sincerely,
Rosemary A Hall
Rt 2 Box 302-A
Laural Hill
Florida
32567

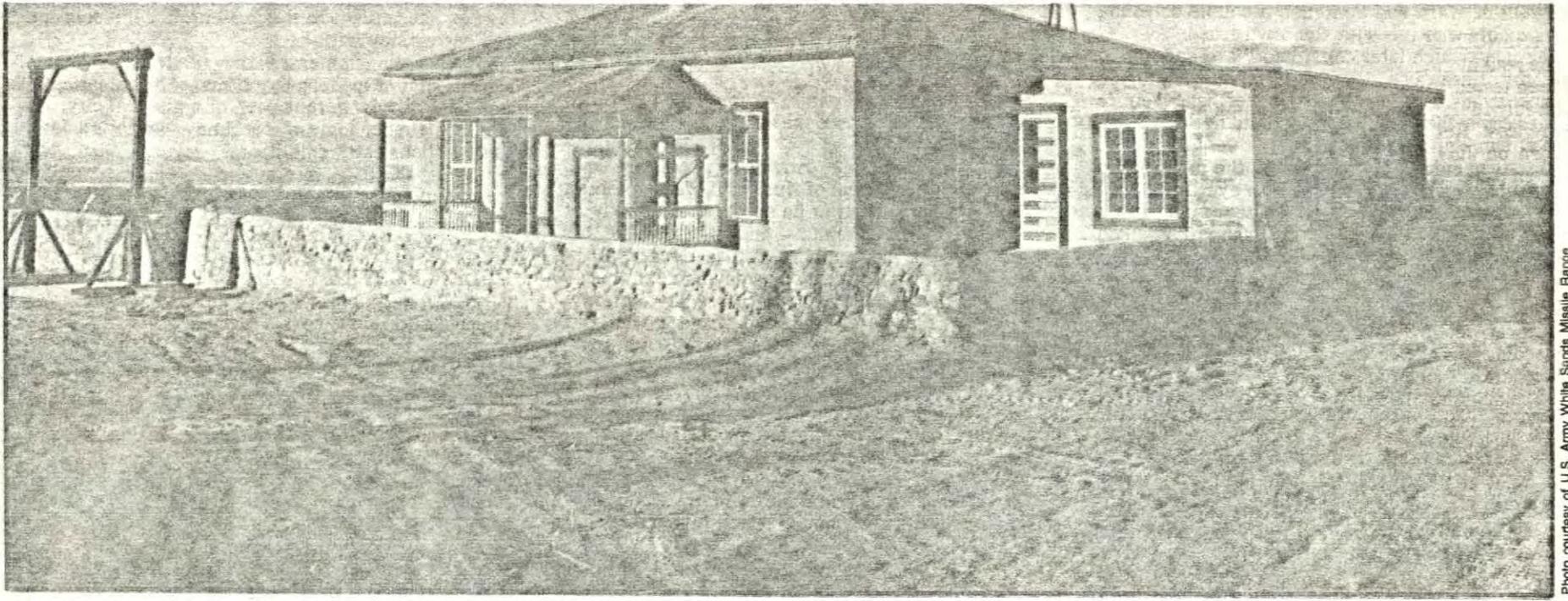


Photo courtesy of U.S. Army, White Sands Missile Range

The McDonald Ranch house on White Sands Missile Range.

Story by **BOB GROVES**

THE ATOMIC HOUSE THAT SCHMIDT BUILT

Her bedroom, as Frances Schmidt remembers it now, 70 years later, was on the northwest corner of the house and was painted blue. Her daddy had hired an unfortunate man named Mike Walsh to paint all the rooms in the house. He had painted the living room peach or tan; she can't recall exactly which. The ceilings

were painted cream and separated from the wall hue by a stenciled scroll border. Walsh, who suffered from tuberculosis, had moved from Chicago to New Mexico for his health, and Franz Schmidt had taken him in.

Next to Frances' room was the bedroom where her parents, Franz and Esther Schmidt, slept. It was pale green. It was the room where Frances' younger brother, Thomas, and baby sister, Margaret, usually slept too because the boy was sickly and the girl was just an infant.

The Schmidts' northeast bedroom — a children's haven from fevers and bad dreams — was also the room where, 25 years after the family had moved out, scientists assembled the core of the world's first atomic bomb on a hot Friday the 13th during the summer of 1945. By then, the Schmidts' home in the Jornada del Muerto desert of central New Mexico was known as the McDonald Ranch.

FRANCES SCHMIDT WAS living in Florida when she read in the newspaper that an atomic bomb had been tested somewhere in New Mexico near dawn on July 16, 1945. The date was doubly significant for Frances. Her mother, Esther Schmidt, had been born on July 16, 1888. Esther didn't think much about where the bomb had exploded. But Frances did.

"The more I thought about it when they told us where it went off," said Frances, who still lives in Florida and turns 79 in November, "I thought, there isn't a house left standing out there except our house, because all the other houses were the regular Mexican adobe type. I just knew the only thing left standing was that house Daddy built, because it had a concrete foundation and tin roof."

The Schmidts had quit New Mexico for Florida in 1920. Between then and when the bomb exploded, the house had changed hands three times. The last set of hands were those of the U.S. government, which had appropriated 51,500 acres of desert ranchland for its Trinity Site at the Alamogordo Gunnery and Bombing Range (renamed the White Sands Missile Range in 1958). The bomb, tested there as part of the top-secret Manhattan Project carried out in Chicago and Los Alamos, was the prototype for the Little Boy and Fat Man bombs dropped Aug. 6 and 9, 1945, respectively, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

It was not until 1984, a year before the 40th anniversary of The Bomb, however, that Frances saw a network TV newscaster broadcasting a story from New Mexico in front of a house that looked familiar. The newscaster's name was Drinkwater, a nice name for a man standing in the middle of the desert. The house was about two miles southeast of Ground Zero, where the bomb was dropped from a

✓ 100-foot steel tower to a target below. The blast blew out the house's windows, but the low stone wall around the house withstood the shock wave. The U.S. Army had allocated \$256,000 to the National Park Service to restore the house and open it once a year as a tourist attraction. Frances just knew that had to be the house where she had grown up.

So this year, Frances and her daughter, Rosemary Hall, finally wrote to officials at White Sands with the untold story of the McDonald Ranch. "My mother is so proud you cared enough to preserve and restore her home," Ms. Hall wrote on Frances' behalf. "I don't know if the name can be changed, but in reality... it should be called the Schmidt Ranch."

White Sands has yet to decide whether to rename the ranch, said James Eckles, public affairs official for the missile range. County homesteading documents and surviving members of the McDonald family, however, have substantiated the Schmidts' story. The Schmidts may yet occupy an intriguing, albeit small, footnote to atomic history.

AS A GIRL, Frances Schmidt wandered the



Photo courtesy of the Schmidt family.

Franz, Esther and Frances Schmidt.

Jornada del Muerto where Indians had ambushed and burned wagon trains along this "Dead Man's Route." All that remained were charred wheel hubs, strewn over the terrain. But it is the flowers that fill her enduring memories of New Mexico.

"My father," she wrote Eckles, "had that house built, I would say, the first part of 1913. My sister

was born in July and was a small baby when we moved in — it would have (been) in the fall. Mama and I walked behind the wagon picking Blackeye Sussys (sic), fall flowers.... We had flowers in the yard, zinnias, all along the south wall that was my job to water...."

Frances' father, Franz Schmidt, was born in Rhein, Prussia (now Germany) in 1863. He emigrated to the United States, passing through Ellis Island when he was 17. While working for merchants in New York City, he was assigned to a branch office in Santa Fe in the days when New Mexico was still a territory. The young, enterprising Schmidt befriended Indians and shepherders and decided to quit the mercantile trade. He applied for citizenship in 1894 and moved south to herd his own sheep and cattle. In 1906, he married Esther Holmes, an 18-year-old farm girl from Pearsall, Texas, and settled on the desert flats southwest of the town of San Marcial, where Frances was born two years later.

The Schmidts' first house burned down in 1912. The family moved into its barn, which was used mainly for sheep shearing and where Frances had played on the wool sacks. They added a fireplace for cooking and lived there while an old Norwegian stonemason and drifter named John Finago — Frances isn't sure of the spelling of his name — built them a new home. Franz Schmidt had found "Old John" wandering the streets of Albuquerque and taken him in out of the cold. Part of the barn was a garage, grease pit and lodging for Mike Walsh, the consumptive painter from Chicago, who also maintained the family Dodge.

Old John the mason built the Schmidts a house of pebble dash (cement over adobe) walls on the outside, smooth plaster inside. He attached a tin roof to the adobe with 18-inch bolts to anchor it against the wind. A charcoal filter on the north side of the house purified the rain water from the roof on its way to a storage cistern. There was a well, a pump, a bivalve tank for watering the garden and the sheep trough and a Chicago Aermotor windmill where Esther hung meat, wrapped in a sheet, safe from animals. Later she stored the meat in an ice house and cellar joined to the main house by a breezeway. During the winter, she cut ice chunks from adjoining water tanks. A potbellied stove with an Eisenglass door and chrome footrail warmed the living room. A row of young cottonwood trees shaded the front of the house. Old John surrounded the house with a low stone wall. He constructed a concrete dipping vat for disinfecting sheep at the original homestead site, a full and unoffensive mile from the new home. Altogether, the house and its various outbuildings occupied about three acres.

In 1914, two years after New Mexico became a state, Schmidt filed a homesteading claim on 153 acres with the Land Office at Las Cruces. Schmidt also owned a second ranch just west of Mockingbird Gap. His brother Fred operated this spread. It included a former post office named after John P. Murray, the man who built the small wooden building and drilled a water well for his mine claim there. Old John built another rock house north of the ranch, at Hansonburg Hills, where he was later buried.

A Florida family, the Schmidts, claim to have built McDonald Ranch at the historic Trinity site and want recognition for the feat.

Scientists transport a plutonium core from the Schmidt house to ground zero.

Thanks to the Kaiser, German-Americans were not overly popular on the home front during World War I. To better blend in with his neighbors, Franz Schmidt became Frank Smith, but was known throughout the area by both names. Nonetheless, the Schmidt/Smith ranch flourished and grew to include 12,000 head of sheep and 1,000 head of Chihuahua cattle. According to Frances, her father imported the area's first two purebred bulls, one a shorthorn, the other a Hereford.

By 1920, failing health and a four-year drought did in Franz Schmidt. He sold what was left of one ranch to a businessman named John Snyder and the other to Holm Bursom, a rancher, then moved his family to Florida. Fred Schmidt hung on for a couple of years, then headed for California. George McDonald, a member of New Mexico's huge ranching McDonald clan, bought the Snyder property from a bank, only to relinquish it under duress to the Army in 1942 for an amount the McDonalds still contend was a pittance.

On July 13, 1945, a group of sweating scientists taped plastic over the windows, doors and cracks of what was once the Schmidts' master bedroom to seal out the dust. While getaway jeeps idled outside, the gowned and gloved scientists delicately put together the two plutonium hemispheres of the bomb's fissionable core. Then they cooled off with a dip in the Schmidts' cistern, which the Army had commandeered and converted into a swimming pool.

THE LAST BIG social event at the Schmidt/McDonald Ranch was a rattlesnake roast hosted a couple of summers after the Trinity explosion test by some government scientists who had finished testing radioactive vermin left over from the blast. It was an invitation-only affair. Two retired ranchers — George McDonald's brother Dave and Holm Bursom's son, Holm Jr. — remember the Schmidts and the roast.

"I met both of the Schmidts," recalled Dave McDonald, who now lives in Cloudcroft and turned 86 on July 5. "Frank ran sheep and Fred ran cattle. Frank was a pretty good guy. He was a partner with a rancher named Charlie Story. Frank was the first one who put anything there. He put in a basement and an ice cooler. I think it was for his beer."

McDonald had the keys to his brother George's house and opened it for the scientists

and their snake roast, which he thinks took place around 1947 or '48. McDonald and Bursom showed up early. The men insist that, even skinned and beheaded, the snakes still wriggled beneath the lid of a frypan, waiting to be dunked into a pressure cooker once the other guests arrived. McDonald sat next to Bursom during the roast and ate steak but passed up the snake — he had seen too many snake-bit livestock while he was growing up. "I didn't miss a thing," said McDonald with no regrets.

Bursom, a former banker and mayor of Socorro for 22 years, remembers Fred Schmidt, his son Tony and daughter Jornada, named after the surrounding desert where they lived.

"Dave McDonald said he wouldn't eat a piece of damn rattlesnake for anything, but I did. It was the first time I ate some," said Bursom, now 79 years old. "It wasn't bad. It was white meat. Tasted like chicken. The herpetologists were testing rattlesnakes for radiation because they didn't know anything about the atomic bomb. I don't know if the roast was a scientific test. Maybe it was part of their work, to see if it would kill us. It was just a lot of fun, just like if somebody invited you to a party and cooked up a cow's head. A damn cow's head is delicious."

As Bursom remembers the Schmidts, Fred had a handlebar mustache and Frank had the heavier German accent. He knew them as the Smiths.

"The local people are going to call you whatever they're going to call you. If you're skinny, they call you 'Slim.' This is very informal country. Hell, I've had my name spelled 500 different ways."

Frances Schmidt believes that years ago Holm Bursom Jr. stole some peaches she was saving for when her mother came back from the hospital.

"That I don't recall," said Bursom with a chuckle. "But I could have. I would have been very capable of doing that."

Yet those purloined peaches, and Mike Walsh's peach-tinted decor, still color Frances Schmidt's memory of the McDonald Ranch.

"I don't know why that place has always bugged me," said Frances, who found the fabled "Stallion Gate" at the property's north end closed to the public when she passed by there on her way to San Marcial in 1977. "In some way, it's always seemed like home to me."