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.
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 Hailey, 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.

Site Section A-A

bench mark at 5,038 feet above sea level.

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 archaeological 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 Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) directed the program for the National Park Service. Sally Kress Lampkins was the program manager and Robie S. Lange was assistant program manager for the architectural/engineering component. Technical assistance was provided by Donald C. Jackson, Building Technology Incorporated (BTI) was the primary contractor to HAER for the DARCOM survey. William A. Drummer was the BTI project manager and Larry O. Lankton was the chief technical consultant.

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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:
- white
- lemon yellow
- peach
- light blue-green
- dark forest green
- light mint green

Scale:
- 1 inch = 1 foot (60 mm)
- 10 cm
- 20 cm

Corner Pattern
- Size: 0.18" (4.5 mm)
- Repeat: 0.75" (19.05 mm)

Repeated Border Pattern
- Size: 2.54" (64.5 mm)
- Repeat: 0.18" (4.5 mm)

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 stone-mason, 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 McNamara. 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 been in the fall -- Mama and I walked behind the wagon picking black eye peas and fall flowers.

You don't know how happy it makes me to know the place will be taken care of -- thank Mr. Telford 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 Mama's 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 and really 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...
Believe it or not, 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 Mama's and Daddy's 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 we were 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 Hansonton Hills -- old John was living there when he died -- we can't thank you enough for the pictures and restoring the place.

Wander 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 Hansonton.

Thank all of you again.

Frances Hall
Dear Sir:

The house at Trinity Site was built between late 1912 and early 1913. My Grandfather and 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. The 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 Chief wood range for cooking.

The "southwest 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 and one a baby.

The living room had a stove on the style of a pot belly stove. It had glass doors & a chrome rail at the bottom where you could prop your feet up on this. There were kerosene lamps in the kitchen with 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" as 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 gardens were watered from the water tank. Two values on the water tank, one for the gardens & one on the opposite side for the sheep 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 room, a room for my grandmother's brother Frank Holmes & Mr. John Finage (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 barn was for shearing sheep; stacking of wool bags. There was also a hay & a wagon. The barnhouse & barn also had tin roof. These were to catch rainwater because water was scarce. Snow was also used to fill the sixteen. 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, NM, Mexico, by my grandparents. He had care of the car & drove it, among other jobs at the ranch.

John Sinago 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 Sinago is on a hill close to the house.

The adobe used for the house was made. The adobe used for the house was made right next to the house. We guess the pit filled in & 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 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 tank.

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 sheep 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 Mr. Suyder 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/founders. Some was homesteaded as 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 Rhein, Germany. He became an American citizen. My grandmother was Esther Holmes from Pearsall, Texas. They were married in 1906 and had three children: Frances (my mother), Thomas, and Margaret.

I hope this helps some. My mother is so proud you cared enough to preserve her home. You will never know how much the pictures and 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 and some pictures. Any questions, just ask. Please advise before printing any of this information, so
we are aware & 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 the 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 Hallsburg Hills at the same time or just after the house at Trinity site. It was also built by my grandfather. John Finag, same design but smaller; no ice house. It was used mainly as a lumber house. J & W Finag & 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, made a home for my great-grandmother. 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. Sometimes delivering mail to people if they were going that way. There was a steel windmill
that pumped water into a large rain tank. There should have been a spring here because the wagon trains crossed here in the 1800s. 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. The trains could be with rocks; cedar bark. The trains could be ambushed before reaching the Gap. On the eastern 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 the Gap behind 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
P.O. Box 309 A
Jaspe Hill
Florida
32367
The McDonald Ranch house on White Sands Missile Range.

Story by BOB GROVES

THE ATOMIC HOUSE THAT SCHMIDT BUILT
er bedroom, as Frances Schmidt remembers it, now 70 years later, was on the northeast 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, Margareta, usually slept too because the boy was sickly and the girl was just an infant.

The Schmidts' northeast bedroom — a children's haven from tevers and bad dreams — was also the room where, 25 years after the family had moved out, scientist assembled the core of the world's first atomic bomb on a hot Friday the 13th during the summer of 1945. By then, the Schmidt house was in the Jornada del Muerto desert of central New Mexico where the McDonald family 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 me where it went off," said Frances, who still lives in Florida and turns 79 in November, "the more I thought, there isn't a house left standing out except our house, because all the other houses were the regular Mexican adobe type. I just knew it had to have been the northeast corner, the standing was that house Daddy built, because it had a concrete foundation and tile roof."

The Schmidts had quit New Mexico for Florida in 1928. 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 30,500 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, was the first to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

"My father," she wrote Eckles, "had that house built. He had 18-inch bolts to anchor it to the adobe with 18-inch bolts to anchor it to the adobe with 18-inch bolts to anchor it against the wind. A charcoal filter on the north side of the house, perfect for the air that came from the east, perfect for its way to a storage cistern. There was a well, a pump, a twelve-foot tank for watering the garden and the sheep trough and a Chicago Aermotor windmill where the wind was right on the clipping stage, clipped in a sheet, safe from animals. Later she stored the main 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 Excalibur door and chimney foot was warm with the living room."

Franz, Esther and Frances Schmidt.

Franz, Esther and Frances Schmidt.

Jornada del Muerto where Indians had ambushed them a new home, Frances 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 built the Schmidt's house of peach cobbles (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, perfect for the air that came from the east, perfect for its way to a storage cistern. There was a well, a pump, a twelve-foot tank for watering the garden and the sheep trough and a Chicago Aermotor windmill where the wind was right on the clipping stage, clipped in a sheet, safe from animals. Later she stored the main 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 Excalibur door and chimney foot was warm with the living room."

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

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 II. 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 1,500 head of Chihuahua cattle. According to Frances, her father importuned the area's first two purebred bulls, one a shorthorn, the other a Hereford.

By 1940, following 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 Burson, 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 crooks 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 Schmidt's cistern, which the Army had commandeered and converted into a swimming pool.

The last big social event at the Schmidts' 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 Burson's son, Holm Jr. — remember the Schmidts and the roast.

"I met both of the Schmidts," recalled Dave McDonald, who now lives in Clovis and turned 86 on July 8. "Frank ran sheep and Fred ran cattle. Frank was a pretty good guy. He was a partner with a rancher named Charlie Steele. Fred was the first one who put anything here. He put in a basement and an ice cooler. I think it was for his beer."

McDonald had the savvy 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 Burson showed up early. The men intimated that, even skinned and behatted, 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 Burson during the roast and ate stak 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.

Burson, a former banker and mayor of Socorro for 32 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 dead rattlesnake for anything but I did. It was the first time I ate one," said Burson, now 79 years old. "It wasn't bad. It was white meat. Tasted like chicken. The herpetologists were testing rattlesnake 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 bit 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 Burson 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 wherever 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 200 different ways."

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

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

Yet those plucked 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 hugged me," said Frances, who found the fabled "Staircase Gate" at the property's north end closed to the public when she passed by there on her way to San Marcel in 1977. "In some way, it's always seemed like home to me."