

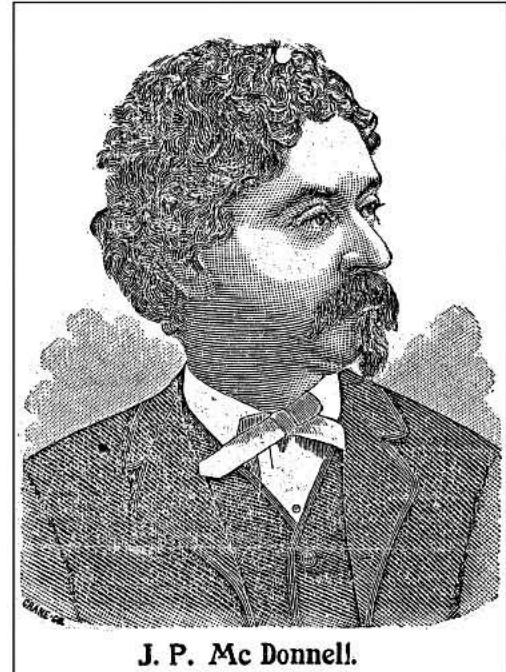
# Courage for Any Venture: J.P. McDonnell— Fenian, Editor and Labor Leader

BY L.A. O'DONNELL

**O**n New Year's Day 1873, Joseph Patrick McDonnell arrived in New York with his wife, Mary McEvatt. Due to their poverty they had come over from England in steerage class on a voyage lasting almost one month. The ordeal was carefully documented by McDonnell in letters published in the *New York Herald*, which told of seriously deficient sanitary conditions, absence of privacy for the sexes, bad food, ill treatment of immigrants collected at LeHavre — and called for reforms to protect steerage passengers. A letter to President Grant elicited a reply from Secretary of State Hamilton Fish assuring McDonnell that efforts to remedy these evils would be undertaken.<sup>1</sup>

In his autobiography, Samuel Gompers remembered first having met McDonnell in New York at the office of Patrick Ford, editor of the *Irish World*. He described McDonnell as having “clean-cut small features, wonderful eyes and an abundance of red curly hair.” The longtime American Federation of Labor (AFL) president, who was five-foot four, recalled McDonnell as only an inch or two taller than himself and “was brainy and very gentle, had a beautiful speaking voice and courage for any venture.”<sup>2</sup>

Settling in Manhattan, McDonnell became recording secretary of the New York Council of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA). The IWA, dominated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in London, had recruited McDonnell, who became a loyal member of its general council for several years before emigrating. The 1870s decade was one of economic depression, unemployment, labor turmoil and contesting social theories. The period was a highly formative one for the American labor movement. Manhattan was an arena for contending ideas brought by exiles and refugees from Europe, such as IWA activist Friedrich A. Sorge and by native radicals such as Peter J. McGuire. The New York Council of the IWA met regular-



J. P. Mc Donnell.

ly at the Tenth Ward Hotel at Broome and Forsyth Streets in lower Manhattan. More intensive debate, however, took place among an inner circle of ten men, including McGuire and Samuel Gompers (although a member of this inner circle, Gompers never joined the IWA).

In his autobiography, Gompers recalled that “from these men who were genuine revolutionaries in thought and in deed, men to whom principles meant something, I learned the fundamentals of the labor movement. They were men who did not hesitate to risk something to accomplish a purpose.”<sup>3</sup> Gompers, incidentally, had become acquainted with McGuire at the Coopers Union Free School, where they were both members of the Rising Sun Debating Society.

All but Gompers himself were IWA members. In their wide-open, late-night seminars, Marxian, Lasalleian and Utopian socialism, anarchism and other isms were assessed for their relevance to American workers. From these origins, permanence in the form of the American Federation of

*Illustration: Portrait of McDonnell published in the National Labor Standard in 1906. Samuel Gompers described McDonnell as having “wonderful eyes and an abundance of red curly hair.” Courtesy of L.A. O'Donnell.*

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## OCEAN STEERAGE ABUSES,

Encouraging Prospects of Needful Legislation—  
Mr. J. P. McDonnell Persevering in the Good  
Work—Secretary Fish Alive to the Importance of Protecting the Immigrant.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE HERALD:—

SIR—In my letters of January 27 and February 4 I declared my intention to prosecute an inquiry into the ocean steerage abuses and to leave no stone unturned to bring about the enactment of better emigration laws. I have so far succeeded in fulfilling my promise that public attention is now directed to the question and hundreds of persons throughout the country have written to me expressing their willingness to bear testimony to the treatment which they received on Atlantic ocean steamships. I may say that in no case has any person accused me of exaggeration, but many consider that I have not painted the picture of ocean steerage life in colors dark enough, and all urge upon me to push the matter forward fearlessly. I shall do so. The public must also do so and the press must not remain in the background. The public man who will hold his tongue over this question or the paper which will suppress all reference so it cannot be faithful to the interests of the people, and the millions of emigrants who are now free citizens of the Republic will not be unmindful of such gross neglect. The gratitude of every emigrant and every emigrant's descendant is due to the HERALD for the generous manner in which its columns have been thrown open for the ventilation of this all-important ocean steerage question. I am only an individual, and without your all-powerful aid, could have accomplished but little. The people must now, however, give practical assistance by bringing the question before their trade, political and social clubs, in every city and village throughout the Union. They must not content themselves with mere expressions of sympathy. They can do what will cost them just as little and accomplish a great deal more by agitating the question and forcing it upon the attention of the press and their Congressional representatives. I will do my part, but the public must perform theirs.

In accordance with my pledge I have directed the following letter to the Chairman of the Emigration Commissioners, but the public must clearly understand that the question cannot be settled by any committee of investigation and that it cannot be abandoned until it is taken up and satisfactorily settled by the governments of this country and Europe. I subjoin another letter which this morning I received from Secretary Fish and I am pleased to find that its tone is very promising. I am just now collecting material which I shall use immediately after the investigation. In the meantime I shall be glad to hear from persons who feel a sincere interest in this question.

J. P. McDONNELL.  
257 Bowery, New York.

Labor eventually emerged, but not before numbers of other organizations and ideologies had been tested. From Marxism, Gompers and McDonnell accepted thorough economic organization of workers as the essential foundation for undertaking anything further. So also did P. J. McGuire, but not until considerably later, when he became disenchanted with the method of a labor party as a result of his experience with it.

The Tompkins Square tumult on January 13, 1874, was a classic example of the response

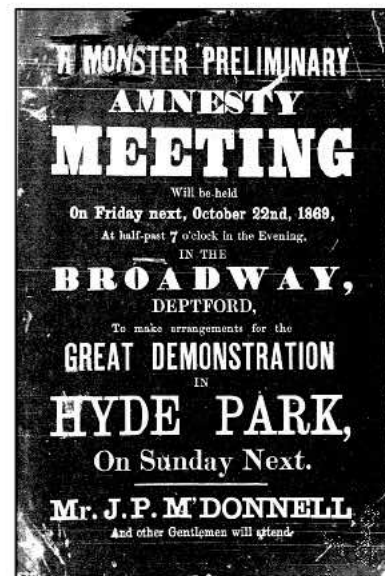
to the depressed condition of the economy. P. J. McGuire, chairman of something called "The Committee of Public Safety" (reminiscent of the French Revolution), had obtained a permit from the mayor's office to hold a rally in Tompkins Square Park to protest unemployment.

Unknown to McGuire, on the morning of the appointed day the permit was rescinded. From 7 to 10 a.m. between seven and ten thousand people had shown up. Before speeches had commenced, police on horseback and on foot rushed to disperse the crowd. Samuel Gompers, who was just approaching the park when police came, escaped harm, but described the scene as "an orgy of brutality." It convinced him that radicalism was unwise and ineffective in the society of the time.<sup>4</sup> McGuire, on the other hand, decided that the only alternative was to change the system, and he set out on a seven-year campaign to establish socialism. There is no record of McDonnell's reaction to this episode, but for some time he continued to favor socialism.

McDonnell next joined a group that established the Central Organization of Trades and Labor Unions of New York, a city federation of local unions. The new organization acquired *The Socialist*, a radical newspaper, and used it as its official organ. They chose McDonnell as its editor. Shortly thereafter, the title was changed to the *New York Labor Standard*, and a *Labor Standard* paper was henceforth identified with J. P. McDonnell.

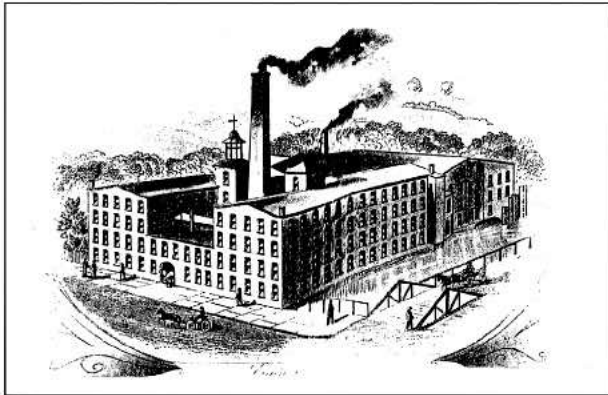
A brief interlude followed beginning in August of 1877 when a trio of activists promoting the eight-hour-workday movement somehow moved the *Labor Standard* to the textile center of River, Massachusetts, and demoted McDonnell to associate editor. Dismayed, McDonnell left and brought the *Labor Standard* to Paterson, New Jersey, from where it emanated thereafter.<sup>5</sup>

Paterson, a classic manufacturing town whose origins trace to 1781 when Alexander Hamilton recognized the falls of the Passaic River



*Illustrations:*  
(Left) Letter from McDonnell published by the New York Herald in 1873 as part of his campaign against dismal conditions imposed on steerage-class passengers crossing the Atlantic from Europe. (Right) By 1869, McDonnell had orchestrated large demonstrations in London's Hyde Park demanding amnesty for Fenian prisoners. Courtesy of L.A. O'Donnell.

as an ideal source of waterpower for industry. He established the Society for Useful Manufactures to develop it. By the 1820s, it had attracted immigrant weavers and spinners from Ulster and other parts of Ireland. In fact, one of its oldest neighborhoods is called “Dublin.” Support for Jacksonian Democracy was strong among Irish workers in Paterson. Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Emancipation strategy inspired a group of Paterson Irishmen to raise funds to support his



movement.<sup>6</sup> The Passaic River was the site of Irishman John Holland’s development of a workable submarine, which he dubbed “The Fenian Ram.”

McDonnell had come to Paterson, then a town of about fifty

thousand, as a founder (with George McNeil) of the International Labor Union, intending to organize its textile workers. A strike had occurred at textile mills of the R & H Adams firm, then the town’s largest company. Workers there and at other companies as well had proved unwilling to accept discipline imposed by factory production and the ethos of their industrial employers.

Wading into the dispute, the Paterson *Labor Standard* named some employees who crossed the picket line as scabs. McDonnell was tried, convicted of libel, and fined \$500 plus court costs (\$67.87). His friends and supporters raised sufficient funds to pay for all of it.

A second encounter with Passaic County Court took place in 1880 when the fearless editor published a letter from an employee of a local brickyard complaining about his employer, Van Blarkham & Clark. The letter from Michael Menton, a young man who boarded on the premises, described being provided meals of rotten bread, rancid butter, tainted meat and equally appetizing coffee. Work hours lasted from 4 a.m. to 6 p.m., with housing and toilet accommodations consisting of leaky wooden shacks. Employees contracted illnesses and were cared for

badly. The firm charged McDonnell with libel. Convicted, he and Menton were sentenced to two months in the county jail — the judge allowing that a fine alone would not deter the editor.

While confined, McDonnell was the recipient of generous community support. With full approval of Warden John Buckley, son of the former mayor, he continued to edit the *Labor Standard*. His meals were delivered from a nearby boardinghouse by his printer’s devil, George Leonard McNeil, son of his former associate, George McNeil. Paterson saloons provided McDonnell with a fully adequate supply of spirits and cigars. Special dinner celebrations materialized for both his birthday and St. Patrick’s Day. Visitors were welcomed hospitably, often in the warden’s office. Old friends Samuel Gompers of the cigarmakers’ union and O’Donovan Rossa of Fenian days came, as well as Terence Powderly, mayor of Scranton and leader of the Knights of Labor, among others.

McDonnell’s release on April 1, 1880, was celebrated by a gathering estimated to be fifteen thousand at a minimum, and a banquet was held in his honor, at which he was presented with a gold watch suitably inscribed. While workers made up the bulk of the crowd, numerous small businessmen and professional people also participated. Evidently, important elements of the community, in addition to its workers, were favorably disposed to the thirty-three-year-old critic of the evils of industrialism.<sup>7</sup>

#### LOBBYING SKILL

As his passion for socialism abated, McDonnell instigated formation of important labor institutions. Early in 1879, the annual New Jersey Labor Congress had become a reality. It met in the state capitol in Trenton to promote labor-reform laws. Next, in 1883, the New Jersey Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions materialized at McDonnell’s urging, and he became chairman of its legislative committee. In that position he mobilized voting strength in industrial communities to elect candidates who pledged to support reform legislation after canvassing their positions on the issues. There followed lobbying during sessions of the legislature to see that the specific bills were introduced and that legislators who agreed to vote for them actually did so. According to

*Illustrations:  
Idealized images of  
mills in Paterson  
during the late  
nineteenth century.  
Courtesy of L.A.  
O’Donnell.*

labor historian Herbert Gutman, McDonnell spent fifteen winters in Trenton lobbying in this manner. The fruit of his effort was reform laws: those restricting child labor, requiring safety standards in industry, limiting the workweek in manufacturing to fifty-five hours, and those restricting use of convict labor. In 1887, New Jersey became the first state to make Labor Day a legal holiday, thanks to McDonnell.

Among his other occupations, the persuasive former Fenian was appointed the state's deputy inspector of factories and workshops by Governor Leon Abbett. He also became chairman of the state's Board of Arbitration and Mediation and actively involved himself in a variety of labor disputes until employers persuaded the legislature to abolish the board.

In 1884, McDonnell organized the Paterson Trades Assembly (composed of local unions in the town). Two years later, he established the Paterson Typographical Union and remained a member for life. He was a general organizer of the American Federation of Labor from 1902 on.<sup>8</sup> He was chosen chairman of the National Labor Press Association at its founding in the same period.

#### ORIGINS AND EDUCATION

This diminutive firebrand and gifted journalist was born to a comfortable middle-class family in Dublin on March 27, 1847. While favoring Irish independence, his parents were not passionate about it. Son Joseph began his education at the national school on Marlborough Street in Dublin, which he attended from 1853 to 1858. A year later he entered the relatively new Catholic University of Dublin, an institution promoted by Archbishop Paul Cullen. Its first rector had been John Henry Newman (later Cardinal Newman). He remained its head until the year before McDonnell enrolled. Most of the University's faculty were Englishmen who had converted to Catholicism during the Oxford Movement. Shortly, this largely British faculty became aware of McDonnell's precocious oratorical skill, as well as his Irish nationalism. He joined the Brotherhood of St. Patrick (a recruiting ground for Fenianism), which nurtured his ardor for Irish freedom.

In 1861 Archbishop John Hughes of New York made a trip to Europe with the twofold pur-

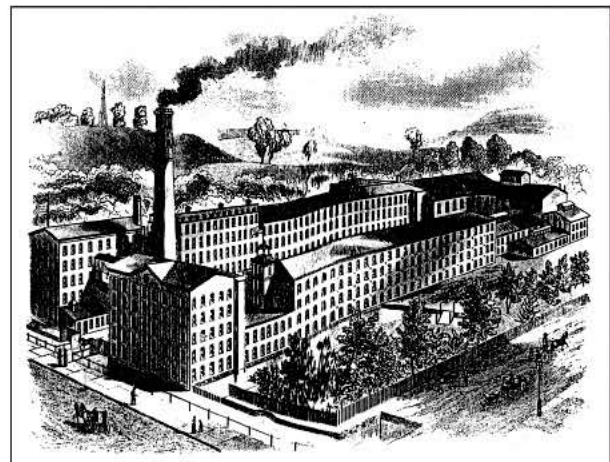
pose of consulting with the Vatican and carrying out a mission for President Lincoln who, he was led to believe, needed his help in countering the efforts of Confederate agents James M. Mason and John Slidell to secure support for the southern states from England and France. In fact, wily Republican politician Thurlow Weed (a close associate of Secretary of State William H. Seward) was cultivating Hughes with an eye to bringing his faithful (mostly Democratic) flock into the Republican column. Flattered, the archbishop apparently had no suspicion of the manipulation.

In any case, on this trip Hughes visited Dublin University, and young McDonnell was chosen to present a welcoming address for him. Impressed, the prelate complimented the lad for his words and observed, "Should you join the priesthood you will become a great bishop; but whatever

you choose you will be great and good." The possibility of his becoming a priest was promptly closed, however, when he presented himself to the Maynooth seminary. His refusal to take

an oath to report any activity seditious to the British government was the reason. Until then, his father devoutly hoped he would become a man of the cloth.

The eloquent young man's displays of distaste for British rule resulted in his being threatened with expulsion from the Dublin university on several occasions. When he and Charles G. Doran — secretary of the Brotherhood of St. Patrick and an architect who later designed the cathedral at Cobh — toured Dublin, closing valves on gas mains to prevent illumination of the city in honor of the Prince of Wales and his bride who were visiting the city, it was the last straw. He was thrown out.<sup>9</sup>



## FENIAN ACTIVIST

It was in the house of Samuel McEvatt in Dublin that the Brotherhood of St. Patrick was organized. McEvatt was then middle-aged and had participated in the republican movement of 1848. He became an early member of the Fenian movement. In fact, many important meetings of the Fenians took place in his house. He was clearly a mentor of McDonnell and became the father-in-law of the young man sometime later — in London. Like most Irish rebels, he was no stranger to British prisons. In 1863 McDonnell had become a Fenian — that is, a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), as it was otherwise known. Soon thereafter, he became one of the editors of the vigorously nationalist *United Irishman* and also a contributor to the *Irish People*, a newspaper that had been established in 1863 by James Stephens, leader of the IRB. By 1865 he had risen to membership in the provisional council of the movement. Following revelations of Pierce Nagle, a British agent, who had penetrated the organization, those associated with the *Irish People* were imprisoned, including McDonnell. The Habeas Corpus Act having been suspended, he remained in prison but was never put on trial. After a twenty-month stint in the town of Mullingar in County Westmeath as proprietor of a news agency and tobacco shop financed by his long-suffering father, he emigrated to London. The shop had suffered from his stealthy preoccupation with Fenianism and from harassment by police.<sup>10</sup>

## LONDON ENDEAVORS

Once in London, McDonnell resumed his journalistic career as summary editor for the London *Evening Standard*, as well as editor of *Universal News*, an Irish nationalist paper published in the city. In addition, he served as London correspondent for the *Dublin Irishman*. His public oratory in London began with an address welcoming George Train, a wealthy American and world traveller, recently released from prison in Dublin. Train had been detained for publicly advocating Irish freedom. By 1869 McDonnell had organized the English Amnesty Committee to promote release of Fenian prisoners. Subsequently, he orchestrated large gatherings at the “Reformers’ Tree” in Hyde Park, where he demanded freedom for those in custody.

His oratory impressed Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, both residing in London at the time. Inviting McDonnell to join the International Workingmens Association (IWA or “First International”), which they dominated, they subsequently nominated him for membership on its general council, resulting in his unanimous election in July of 1871. He faithfully served the organization as corresponding secretary for Ireland and was instrumental in forming branches in Ireland and among Irishmen living in England. Marx and Engels had been convinced that independence for Ireland was a stepping-stone to the eventual overthrow of capitalism in its citadel — England.

In order to conduct these mass meetings, McDonnell needed to overcome a parliamentary act that prohibited large gatherings in public parks. At one of his early “monster meetings” in Hyde Park, he and seven other speakers were arrested and convicted for violating the law. The case received wide publicity and was appealed to the House of Lords, which yielded to public sentiment and held that the parliamentary law was not a legal enactment. These mass meetings were an important factor in the British government’s ultimately determining that Fenian prisoners would be released on condition that they emigrate.

At the time of the Franco-Prussian War, McDonnell became involved in a plan to organize a brigade of Irishmen, disguised as an ambulance corps, to fight for the French. The underlying purpose was to provide combat experience to be put to use in future rising in Ireland. A certain General McAdaras, who had contrived to obtain that rank in the French army by devious methods, was to deliver funds from France to finance the brigade, but failed to do so, leaving the burden to McDonnell. The plan became known to the German ambassador in London who lodged an official protest with British authorities, resulting in McDonnell’s arrest for violation of the Foreign Enlistment Act. A prison stay of two months followed. Finding conditions intolerable in Clerkenwell prison, McDonnell was able to publish letters in London papers protesting them. As a result he was moved to Newgate prison, where treatment was not as bad.

McDonnell had been arraigned, but the trial was suspended. At length he was released on bail

— and the trial was never resumed. The cost of defense and financial burden of the brigade left him essentially bankrupt.<sup>11</sup>

On March 15, 1871, McDonnell had married the daughter of Samuel McEvatt in the Franciscan church of Peckham, London. Together he and his bride boarded the *S.S. Erin*, steerage class, in early December 1872, for a voyage that proved to be one of truly appalling conditions.

#### AFTERWORD

When George Francis Train arrived in Paterson around the turn of the century to speak to a large gathering of silk workers, he was greeted by Charles Beckwith, its mayor, and J.P. McDonnell. His first words to McDonnell were: “What, you who stirred up all England and parts of Europe, here in a little village?”

Indeed, the passionate voice was heard and expressed in print on two continents to further the cause of justice which inspired him. Surprisingly, his career would be unknown but for labor scholars such as John R. Commons and Herbert Gutman and for the recollections of Samuel Gompers and John Devoy cited herein. His career dramatizes how a youth from Dublin’s middle class came to devote an entire life to the cause of justice, first for Ireland, later for workers in Europe and America. Karl Marx exerted a strong influence on him, but did not cause him to become doctrinaire. Rather, he was something of a lifelong pragmatist who finally accepted AFL-style unionism — but not entirely. The AFL pattern of voluntarism (i.e., opposition to government involvement) was contrary to his emphasis on labor-reform legislation. His devotion to organizing unskilled workers in textile firms in industrial unions did not follow the AFL pattern of skilled craft unions. Even so, he was a lifelong friend of Samuel Gompers from 1873 on.

McDonnell’s efforts were rewarded with the obscurity that befalls most of those who dedicate their lives to the dignity of labor in our business-oriented society. At his funeral in 1906, Chief Stagg of the Paterson fire department, spoke these words to his widow, “Well there is no use saying much, Mrs. McDonnell, but I can say that there lies a man who could not keep a dollar in his pocket and know that his fellow man was in want.”<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 *New York Herald*, January 27, February 4, March 6, 1873.
- 2 Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, New York, Dutton, 1925, vol. 1, p. 88
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Gompers, pp. 95–96; Herbert G. Gutman, “The Tompkins Square Riot,” *Labor History*, Winter 1965, pp. 44–70.
- 5 John R. Commons & Associates, *History of Labor in the United States*, New York, Macmillan, 1918, vol. 2, p. 304; biographical sketch of McDonnell dictated by his widow, 1908, McDonnell Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, p. 8.
- 6 Howard Harris, “The Eagle to Watch and the Harp to Tune the Nation: Irish Immigrants, Politics and Early Industrialization in Paterson, N.J., 1824–1836,” *Journal of Social History*, Spring 1990, pp. 580–81.
- 7 Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture & Society in Industrializing America*, New York, Random House, 1977 (Vintage Book), pp. 249–53, 274–77.
- 8 Ibid, pp. 169–71, 280–81, 285–90; *Report of the Ninth Annual Congress of the N.J. Federation of Labor*, 1887.
- 9 Biographical sketch of J.P.McDonnell, pp. 1–2, 7; Sr. M. Jane Coogan, BVM, “A Study of the John Hughes-Terence Donaghoe Friendship,” *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, March–December 1982, pp. 68–70; John Devoy, *Recollections of a Fenian Rebel*, New York, Charles D. Young, 1929, p. 15.
- 10 Biographical sketch of McDonnell, pp. 3, 6–7.
- 11 Ibid., pp.3–5; John Boyle, “Ireland and the First International,” *Journal of British Studies*, May 1972, pp. 44–62.
- 12 Quotes from George Francis Train and from Chief Stagg in reminiscences of Mrs. McDonnell (no date), McDonnell Papers.