

I.D. O'Donnell

1860 - 1948

AGRICULTURAL LEADER

Ignatius Daniel O'Donnell dedicated much of his life to helping farmers modernize and improve their operations. He popularized such crops as alfalfa and sugar beets and helped establish efficient methods of irrigation and dry land reclamation on a national scale.

O'Donnell was born in 1860 in Norfolk, Ontario, to Scots-Irish parents and was one of ten children. The family moved to Saginaw, Michigan, where O'Donnell spent much of his childhood. In 1882, he moved to the Yellowstone Valley in Montana, and in 1887 he married Louise Roeser, whom he had met back in Michigan. Together they had six children.

Soon after moving to Montana, O'Donnell took a job on a large horse ranch and forged relationships with members of the Billings family, who convinced him to come to Billings to work with them on their farming and ranching enterprises.

Seeing ways to improve processes and infrastructure, especially with regards to irrigation, O'Donnell quickly gained a reputation for himself in the region. Private, state, and national agricultural organizations regularly consulted with him. He also founded and owned his own companies to promote farm improvements.

O'Donnell won national acclaim in 1919 when *The Country Gentleman* named him "Best Farmer in Montana" and in 1925 when *The Saturday Evening Post* published a feature about him entitled "Montana's Foremost Farmer." His ranch near Billings, the Hesper Farm, was widely viewed as a model of efficiency.

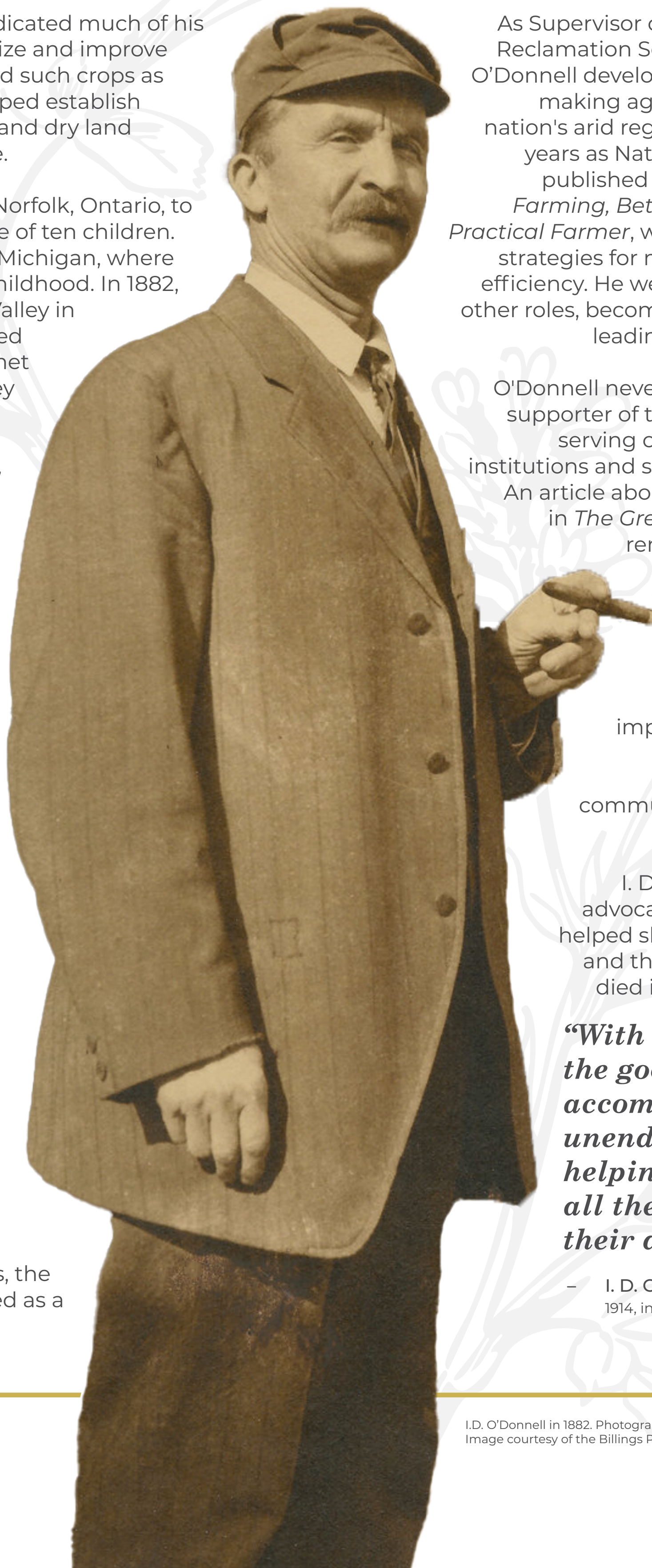
As Supervisor of Irrigation for the U. S. Reclamation Service from 1913 to 1918, O'Donnell developed a practical plan for making agriculture feasible in the nation's arid regions. He also spent five years as National Farm Advisor and published *Better Business, Better Farming, Better Living: Hints from a Practical Farmer*, which provided detailed strategies for maximizing agricultural efficiency. He went on to serve in many other roles, becoming one of the nation's leading experts on irrigation.

O'Donnell never ceased to be a strong supporter of the Billings community, serving on the boards of various institutions and supporting local causes. An article about O'Donnell published in *The Great Falls Tribune* in 1923 remarked that "in Billings whenever money is needed to build an addition to the public library or money is needed for something of historical importance [or] the help is needed of some public spirited citizen, the community instinctively turns to Mr. O'Donnell."

I. D. O'Donnell's lifetime of advocacy and civic leadership helped shape Billings, Montana, and the nation as a whole. He died in 1948 at the age of 87.

"With a knowledge of the good that may be accomplished, I find unending pleasure in helping the farmers on all the projects with their difficulties."

– I. D. O'Donnell,
1914, in *The Billings Gazette*



I.D. O'Donnell in 1882. Photographer unknown.
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