



Historic Crail Ranch

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TO: The Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center
FROM: The Historic Crail Ranch Conservators
DATE: January 13, 2012
RE: 2012 Legacy Nomination from District 9 for MCHF/WHC Induction

The Historic Crail Ranch Conservators of Big Sky, Montana (District 9) submits this nomination proposal for the 2012 Legacy Nomination:

Augustus Franklin Crail (1844 – 1924)

Resident of Bozeman from 1871 to 1901

Resident of Crail Ranch in Gallatin Canyon Basin (Big Sky) from 1901 to 1924

This nomination is submitted on behalf of the **Historic Crail Ranch Conservators** by:

Anne Marie Mistretta, Ph.D., Vice Chair of the HCRC

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Next of kin to Mr. A. F. Crail is Franklin William Crail of Redmond, Oregon. However, due to geographic distance, the award would be accepted by Anne Marie Mistretta, on behalf of the Crail Family and the Historic Crail Ranch Conservators. (The Crail Family has loaned Crail antiques to the Historic Crail Ranch Conservators for their museum and has released all photos and other archival materials to the HCRC for their use in publication and promotion of the museum.)

Augustus Franklin Crail Nomination to the Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame/Western Heritage Center

Augustus Franklin Crail, known as Frank Crail, was born in Decatur County, Indiana, in 1842 to Samuel Spencer Crail and Catherine Weaver. Crail had two brothers and a sister. Frank was destined to be a farmer in Tipton County, Indiana, where his folks lived. But in 1865, seven years after his mother's death, his father subsequently remarried, and the family increased with many half-siblings. Frank Crail left the ancestral home and traveled to the frontier town of St. Joseph, Missouri. There he joined a wagon train and ventured forth to Miles City in the Montana Territory. During the next 59 years, Frank Crail's work as a frontier rancher helped to populate a territory that would eventually seek statehood. His adventurous spirit led him into the Gallatin Canyon Basin, now called Big Sky, where he and others would establish a small ranching community, a toehold settlement in an otherwise wild yet wonderful environment.

By 1868, Frank Crail was working at a quartz mining camp about 30 miles from Helena, Montana. In letters Crail wrote back to his father in Indiana, he spoke about returning home for a visit, but he was fearful of traveling the country after the election of Ulysses S. Grant, the first U.S. presidential election after the Civil War. Frank Crail never would return to Indiana, nor would any members of his family visit him in Montana.

In a letter dated 1871 from East Gallatin, Montana Territory, Crail wrote that he had just built a cabin and corral. He and two other partners claimed a section of land in an area that he called Springhill, located about 18 miles north of Bozeman on the western slope of the Bridger Mountains, "with a water ditch from a never failing stream of water, capable of carrying 1000 inches of water." They broke ground and put in 70 acres of spring wheat. Like many ranchers in his day, Crail and his partners fought a water rights suit against farmers downstream. In this letter Frank Crail informed his father, "I don't think I shall ever come back there to clear a farm." Ranching and dry-land farming proved difficult in the early 1870s. Crail's stock was placed near the Madison and Yellowstone, "the only bare places in the country." Cold, wet, and frosty seasons, along with the "ravages of grasshoppers" challenged ranchers. Hail destroyed much of Crail's wheat, but he got \$1.50 per bushel for what his persistence did produce. In his letters, Crail asks his father to send him money from the sale of his tools and other assets left behind in Indiana, directing him to send either postal money orders or a bank draft, since the First National Bank of Bozeman had been established by this time. Frank purchased stock and supplies with those funds.

Meanwhile, those living in the Gallatin Valley hoped for the Northern Pacific Railroad to come through their valley to ensure an outlet beyond their home market. Crail hauled much of his produce himself to markets outside of Gallatin Valley. By 1872 there had been two surveys for the Northern Pacific. With his land positioned halfway between the two surveys, Crail felt that he was well positioned. Crail wrote, "I have always been rather unlucky, but I think I have got as good a place as there is in Gallatin Valley."

Railroad fever could not build the railroad through the Gallatin Valley quickly enough. By the time the Northern Pacific arrived in Gallatin Valley in 1883, Crail already had decided that he could no longer hold on as a rancher. Although Frank hoped to farm his section forever, in the spring of 1875, he leased his land and began freighting between Fort Benton and Miles City. Crail's land, which he thought would bring \$4,000 or \$5,000, wasn't valued for even half that price. Crail freighted for three years until fear of Indian reprisals forced him to sell off his wagons and yokes of cattle. Always the rancher, he resumed cultivating half of his land while leasing the other half.

In 1886 at age 44, Augustus Franklin Crail married Missourian Sallie Creek, who was 22 years old at the time. Over the next ten years, they had 3 children: Eugene, (born 1887); Emmett, (born 1888); Lilian, (born 1896).

A. F. Crail was a civic-minded individual who kept current by reading printed materials. In his letters home he mentions *The Democrat*, an Indiana newspaper often sent to him by his family, and *The Husbandman*, filled with news of the day for ranchers. He displayed a keen interest in economics and politics in the letters he wrote back to his Indiana family, at one point stating that he wished that Montana would remain a territory rather than become a state. In 1886, Crail was elected to District Clerk of the Ninth Judicial District in Gallatin County. He was elected on the Democratic Ticket against a Republican endorsed by the short-lived Populist Party. He would serve until 1900. His wife Sallie, an award-winning quilter, incorporated Frank's Democratic Convention delegate ribbon tags into one of her quilts on display in the Crail Ranch museum in Big Sky.

With the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1871 and the coming of the Northern Pacific to Bozeman in 1883, road improvements through the canyon carved by the Gallatin River were inevitable. The first crude roads were cut to facilitate logging for the railroad. By the late 1800s, ranchers moved cattle and sheep along the logging road to graze them in the meadows in the Gallatin Canyon Basin and other drainages. By the late 1890s, under the provisions of the Homestead Act, ranchers like Crail began the process of building cabins and establishing and proving up homesteads of 160 acres or more.

With his District Clerk term completed, Crail decided it was time to embark on an interesting experiment. He had developed a strain of wheat to meet the rigors of the short, cold growing season in Montana's high country. He called his wheat "Crail Fife," taking the name from the location in Scotland from which his ancestors migrated in the 1700s. In 1901, for less than \$1.00 per acre, he purchased 160 acres from Daniel Inabnit, on which was located a small one-room cabin. In the spring of 1902, Crail moved his family up the rough logging road from Bozeman to the Gallatin Canyon Basin, now called Big Sky. At the time, his sons were 13 and 12, and his daughter was five years old. The family of five lived in the 255 square foot cabin of 255 for several years. Crail and his sons grew his Crail Fife wheat and ran sheep and cattle on their homestead. Over the years, they annexed a number of homesteads and ranched on a substantial portion of what is now known as the Meadow in Big Sky. On the ranch, they built more than ten ranching structures and a larger home onto which they added throughout their lives. Amazingly, both the tiny cabin and the ranch home still stand on a small portion of Crail's land as stark reminders of the rigors of ranching life over a century ago.

The Crails raised civic-minded children. A Montana Agricultural College (later known as Montana State University) graduate, son Eugene returned to the family homestead after service in WWI and built the first community school, answering his brother Emmett's call. At the time, Emmett was the Ophir School District Board Chair. In 1943, Eugene moved to Idaho and then Washington to supervise defense industry carpentry. Emmett stayed on the ranch. Daughter Lilian trained as a nurse.

Augustus Franklin Crail died on his Gallatin Basin ranch in September, 1924. He was an adventurer, a hard-working rancher, a politician, and a devoted father. An important settler for Big Sky, his family ranched their lands into the mid-20th century, preserving the area from rapid development. Although Crail's 960 acre ranch is a mere 1 acre museum today, it stands as testimony to Big Sky's ranching roots.

Primary Sources: *Ten personal letters*, hand-written by Augustus Franklin Crail to his father, Samuel Spencer Crail, between 1868 and 1897.

Board Minutes, The Ophir School District #72, April 21, 1923 through April 8, 1933.