

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 301: THE McCLOSKEY FAMILY

REESE McCLOSKEY, FROM MILTON, PA (1861-1947)
FIRST WATER RIGHTS ATTORNEY IN THE SOUTHWEST

MABEL DOWNS McCLOSKEY, FROM BRISTOL, CT
CULTURAL PIONEER AND MOTHER OF THREE

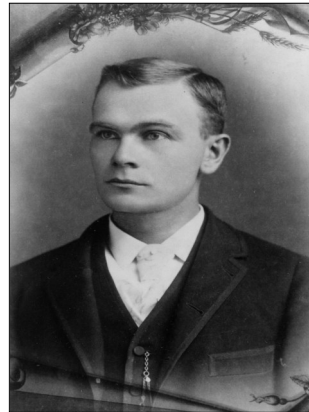
“FIRST IN TIME, FIRST IN RIGHT”

This slogan, coined by Attorney Reese McCloskey, marked the sentiment and law that was created with respect to water irrigation in the mid-1800s. According to his obituary, written by Durango Judge James Noland, Mr. McCloskey “...devoted his talents and his labors to the equitable distribution of the life sustaining waters of the mountains, and became a recognized national authority in that branch of jurisprudence.”

Reese followed his brother, Milton, to Durango after graduating from Lafayette College in Easton, PA. He soon made his way to the new boom town of Rico after a wagon journey over the Scotch Creek toll road. There he unloaded his few personal belongings and began to make legal history for the San Juan Basin and Colorado. Hard

rock miners were staking out their claims, digging, tunneling, drifting and finding themselves becoming increasingly enmeshed in disputes for which there was no help in legal precedents. Reese, with his magnificent mind, was the voice of the mining states and many times the United States, as laws of mining rights which he argued became the final opinion of the judges.

He then went on to help build the next phase of the mining industry which entailed developing railroads. With his team and wagon, sometimes camping for the week in snow drifts, Reese gathered the right-of-way agreements. His contribution was vital to the construction of this important mode of transportation, which in turn brought the outside world to the area and took the



gold and silver, cattle and sheep, hay and grain to the world.

Judge Noland concluded his tribute with “it would be folly to say this great San Juan Empire could have reached its present state of development had not this man lived among us.”

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- Reese was a billiard champion and once played against famous Willie Hoppe when he was in town.
- In 1938 in his late seventies, Reese argued a water-rights case in the U.S. Supreme Court. He continued to practice law at his original office until his death in 1947.
- Mabel’s woodblock engraving of a scene at Emerald Lake has graced the covers of most of the Durango Reading Club’s yearbooks since 1894.
- Mabel’s grandfather, Ephraim Downs, was a famous early American wooden-movement clock-maker in Connecticut who worked with Seth Thomas and Eli Terry.

MABEL DOWNS McCLOSKEY—PROMINENT CULTURAL LEADER

From Bristol, Connecticut, to Durango was quite a journey to visit her sister, Fannie, for Mabel Downs. But it proved to be very worthwhile when she met Reese McCloskey whom she married in 1892.

In 1896 the couple, now with son Downs, bought a new house in the young town of

Durango. Mabel spent two years planning the rebuilding of their home which would become the centerpiece of the family for nearly 90 years.

Using her accomplished literary and artistic talents, Mabel became one of the town’s most prominent women. She was an early member of The

Durango Ladies Reading Club and a leader in securing funds from the Carnegie Corporation to complete the Durango Public Library. It was said she brought an artistic flair to Durango from the East Coast, still evident today.

Mabel and Reese were married for 42 devoted years.

