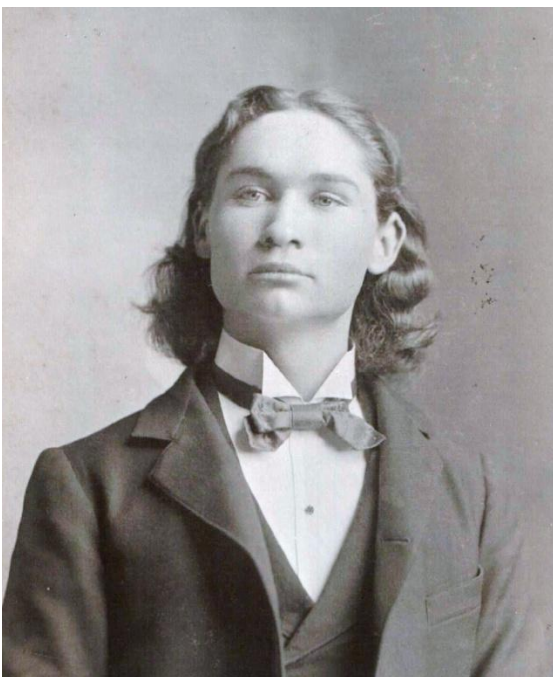




SandHill Marketing photo.

Dr. Haskell House / Johnny McAvoy – 340 North Central Avenue.



Johnny McAvoy - "Liberace of Little Willow."
Richland County History Room photos.

The Dr. Haskell House located on North Central Avenue is like many old houses in Richland Center. They are generally of the vernacular type; not formally designed by an architect, simple in design, and exhibit some ornamentation of a particular style, but do not totally conform to the pattern of that style. This building, likely built in the late 19th century judging by the type of foundation material used, exhibits the turret and irregular rooflines often found in the Queen Anne style. It is well-preserved even though its original cladding is hidden by vinyl siding. Its historical importance lies in the people who once lived there. Johnny McAvoy and his older brother, James, learned to play the fiddle on the family farm on Willow Creek in Richland County. The farm had a big spring and people would come out from Richland Center on Sunday for picnics. The McAvoy brothers would play for the crowds as well as travel the area playing for country dances and the like. In his youth McAvoy was always elegantly dressed and wore his hair long. An old friend from the Willow Creek area said of him, "You were sort of the

Liberace of Little Willow, although your instrument was not the piano.”

His father was James McAvoy, Sr., who came to America from Ireland, first to Chicago, Ill. in 1852 and then to Willow Creek in 1861. James McAvoy was one of the oldest residents in Richland County when he died on the family farm in 1903 at the age of ninety-three.

When his sister Agnes married and moved to Rockford, Ill., Johnny went along and worked in a knitting mill there for ten years. When his sister’s family moved back to Richland County he quit his job and returned to take up the life of a wandering violinist once again.

McAvoy, in an interview with Harry Johnson of *The Republican Observer* told of his travels, “I played ‘Meet Me in St. Louis, Louie’ at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 and later played at the Palm Gardens in Chicago. I had a big sign that read ‘Wandering Violinist. No Requests, Please’ that I carried with me all the time.”



An article from *The Richland Democrat* in 1916 described one of his prized instruments, “Johnny McAvoy had in his possession a violin, which was much prized by its owner, for he had refused an offer of \$500. The instrument had quite a history and was given as follows: It was made in Sydney, Australia, from which place it found its way to California. There it was purchased by Carter Smith, who disposed of it to his brother, L.B. Smith of West Willow. Mr. McAvoy, after purchasing it, placed it in the hands of an expert who repaired its deficiencies. Johnny McAvoy was some actor on a fiddle and could coax entrancing music from this high priced instrument.” This was but one of the seventy-five violins he had collected over the years.

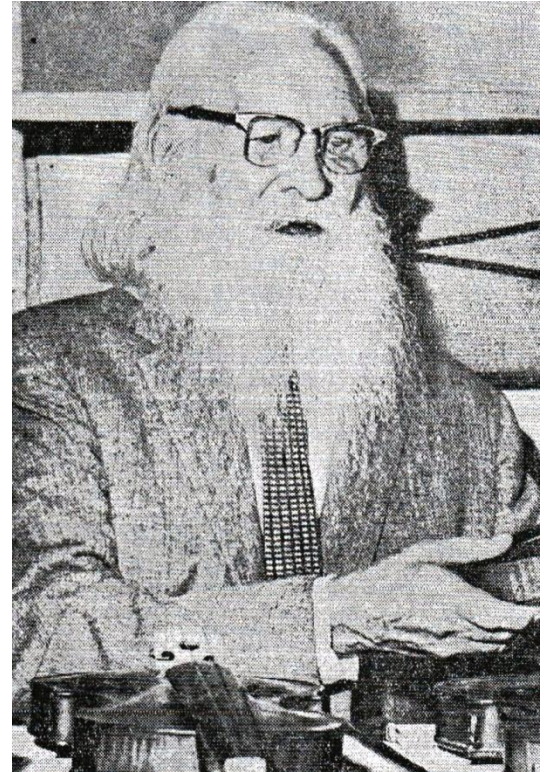
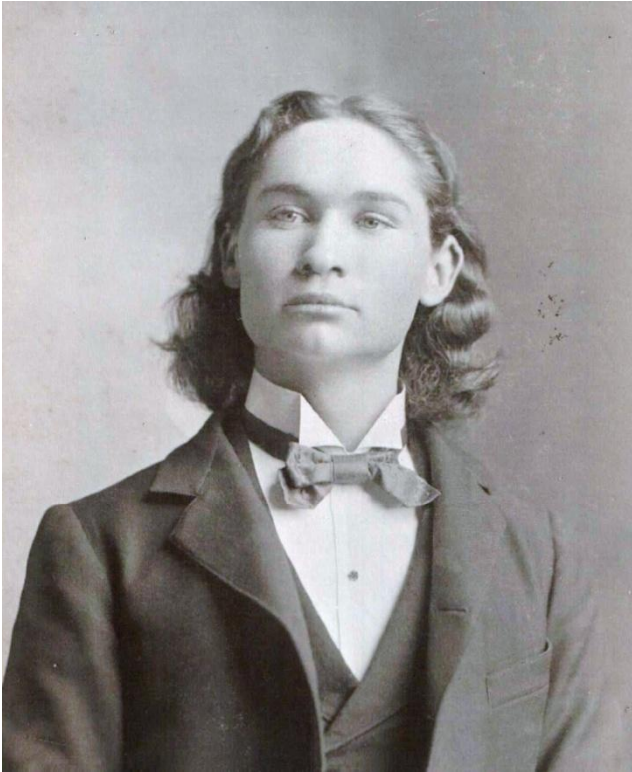
His brother Olford was operating the family farm and Johnny was spending more time playing in Chicago, when on a visit to Richland Center, he saw a “Room for Rent” sign in the window of the Haskell House on North Central Avenue. Dr. Haskell, a prominent city physician, had died a short time before. Dr. Marcus Haskell practiced medicine in Richland Center from 1891 through 1919. During the 1890s he maintained an office in the H.B. Allen Drugstore on Court Street. He was the first Richland Center citizen to own an automobile, which he used to make house calls to his patients. Haskell was also associated with the infamous 1891 Rose Zolduske murder case as one of the physicians who had cared for the victim, Ella Maly. (See *The Mitchell House* narrative for details of this murder).

McAvoy was planning to return to Chicago when the Widow Haskell asked him to remain and take care of her and the house in return for his room and board. The property became his when Mrs. Haskell died. He lived at this residence the remainder of his life until he had to go to the Richland Hospital to be cared for at the end of his life.

It was during this latter part of his life that Johnny McAvoy, the eccentric violin playing bachelor, became known as “Santa Claus.” His flowing white hair and beard earned him the “Santa Claus” moniker as he strolled the streets playing his favorite instrument. Local folk-lore had it that he quit shaving when he lost his life’s savings with the closing of the First National Bank. Another story claims that his wife died at Christmas time and as a result he never took down his Christmas tree. This tale is obviously false since he remained a life-long bachelor.

Johnny McAvoy was born on Sept. 2, 1880, and died at The Richland County Hospital on Oct. 28, 1965, at the age of 85.

John P. McAvoy
December 1st 1915.



“When I think back my life seems like a dream,” Johnny said, as he gazed into the mirror in an interview with Harry Johnson of *The Republican Observer*.

(Keep in mind the homes listed are private residences which are not open to the public. Please respect the occupants' privacy when viewing their homes from the sidewalk).