

## *Our Missouri Podcast*

Title: Episode 7: "Missouri's Bicentennial"

Guest: Michael Sweeney

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KEVIN WALSH: Welcome to *Our Missouri*, a podcast about the people, places, culture, and history of the 114 counties and independent city of Saint Louis that comprise the great state of Missouri. Each episode focuses on a topic related to the state ranging from publications about Missouri's history to current projects undertaken by organizations to preserve and promote local institutions. The *Our Missouri Podcast* is recorded in the J. Christian Bay Rare Books Room at the State Historical Society of Missouri's Columbia Research Center, and is generously provided to you by the State Historical Society of Missouri. And now, here's your host, Sean Rost.

SEAN ROST: Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening, or at whatever hour you are tuning in to listen to the *Our Missouri Podcast*. My name is Sean Rost and I will be your guide as we explore the memories, moments, and misfortunes from our Missouri. As the calendar turns from 2018 to 2019, we are one year closer to Missouri's bicentennial in 2021. What? You didn't realize that Missouri's bicentennial is only a few years away. Well today, to update us on the state's preparations for this historic event, we are speaking with Michael Sweeney. He holds a master's degree in library and information science from the University of Missouri and a PhD in American Studies from the University of Kansas. Prior to rejoining the State Historical Society of Missouri as the Bicentennial Coordinator in 2017, he served as the director of collections at the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. Michael has written for the *Jackson County Historical Society Journal*, and his most recent article, "Fateful Bargain: Race, Money, and Politics in the Origins and Development of Kansas City's Paseo YMCA," appeared in the April 2018 edition of the *Missouri Historical Review*. Welcome to the *Our Missouri Podcast*, Michael Sweeney.

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Hey, thank you for having me. I appreciate it, Sean.

SEAN ROST: Can you tell us, first and foremost, about Missouri's bicentennial? When it is, and kind of what's coming up regarding it.

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Certainly. So, the Missouri Bicentennial is August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021. It's burnt into my brain at this point. We are planning a whole set of community engagement-type projects to get as many people involved across the state as we can. But also, develop interesting projects and programs and events that help people think about the history, culture, and life of the state.

SEAN ROST: In your role as the bicentennial coordinator for the State Historical Society of Missouri, what are you doing on a regular basis, kind of going around the state?

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Well, there's multiple things going on. All at the same time. There's an outreach piece of this. I tell people I'm on a grand seed-planting tour at the moment. Our goal is

to find a way to engage people in all 114 counties and the independent city of Saint Louis So, what I've been doing for the last year, and will, probably, through the rest of this year, is going around and visiting with darn near anyone who will visit with me. We certainly—you know, our Historical Society, we tend to partner with other colleges and universities and other historical societies. But in this instance, we've opened the door really widely. So, I've been meeting with arts councils and chambers of commerce and tourism offices and public libraries and volunteer organizations. Did a rotary club not too long ago. All kinds of conferences for teachers, for historians, for historic preservationists. Digging as far deeply as we can to get people engaged in as many ways as possible. So, outreach is a huge piece of this. The other thing we're doing, though, we're also in the process of developing projects for the State Historical Society to undertake. A lot of our community engagement projects are moving in that direction. We're also partnering with other organizations to try and build-up sort of larger activities that, again, explore the history, culture, and life of the state. We're also trying to plan out what we might do, actually, in 2021 as events and various other things.

SEAN ROST: Now, this is 2018 right now, and we have three years to build towards the bicentennial, and people might assume, you know, that's so long to do that in advance. But yet, it's important to lay the groundwork now, isn't it?

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Oh, certainly. Things of this size, yeah, takes a lot of time to lay some groundwork. And that's why, I guess, I use the idea of planting seeds. But also, you have to have this understanding that to make really exciting things happen, big things happen, it sometimes takes a lot of time. So, even as the clock ticks by—and we recently installed a clock on the Missouri 2021 website to remind me on a daily basis that the clock is ticking. Right, as time passes, actual live options for doing things start dropping off the calendar. For example, a lot of exhibit spaces start planning their exhibits five years in advance. So, even something as simple as, "We'd like to show something in a gallery," we have to get that figured out—probably last year. So, yeah, it's laying a lot of that groundwork. And the challenge there is people aren't generally paying attention either. It's not in the immediate. So, you're trying to battle two things kind of at once.

SEAN ROST: Michael, could you tell us a little bit about how the State Historical Society of Missouri got involved, really, in this bicentennial project?

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Certainly. We were honored by the 97<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 2013 with the task of preparing, leading, and getting ready to guide a commemoration of the Missouri Bicentennial in 2021. The Society held focus group meetings around the state in 2014 and 2015. So, certainly here in Columbia, but also Hannibal and Saint Joe and Kansas City and Saint Louis. Cape Girardeau. Rolla. Around about to see what people were interested in. From that, we started building up a set of projects and programs and various things that now, as I travel about the state, I'm talking to people about. In addition to that, we started laying some groundwork for some bigger things. We worked with the Department of Revenue and the Department of Transportation [and] a number of other government entities to design a new bicentennial license plate. So, that's something that we've been laying groundwork for for a while. In addition to that, though, certainly there are other great state-wide non-profit organizations and government agencies that want to get involved in the bicentennial. So, from a conversation with Missouri

Humanities Council, Missouri State Archives, and ourselves, we developed a Bicentennial Alliance. The Alliance is this coalition, as I mentioned, of other state-wide non-profit organizations [and] government agencies all sort of engaged in bicentennial work. This was initiated in January of [2018]. It includes, at this point, the Kinder Institute [on] Constitutional Democracy—right here on the MU campus—Missouri Arts Council, Missouri Folk Arts Program, Missouri Council for History Education, Missouri Humanities Council, Missouri State Archives, Missouri Historical Society in Saint Louis, and, of course, ourselves. And together, we're all sort of working together to promote and advance all these projects. So, that's kind of built up this larger set of partners and activities and things that are sort of pushing all of this forward. And, we anticipate that the Bicentennial Alliance will grow over the coming years. The thing is, all of these Bicentennial Alliance partners are all sort starting their own projects as well. In addition to the things the State Historical Society is doing, which includes this whole set of community engagement projects—and we can go in to all of those, right—all these Bicentennial Alliance members are starting their own projects. For example, the Kinder Institute [on] Constitutional Democracy has started a Twitter account with the "Missouri Crisis at 200." On a daily basis, people can follow the Missouri Crisis as it unfolds through letters and documents and other historical facts. Missouri Council for History Education is doing new lesson plans for third to fifth graders dealing with the statehood struggle called "Four Years to Statehood." Free and available on their website. Missouri State Archives is going to do a virtual exhibit of government documents showcasing documents for 200 hundred years. Missouri Humanities Council is doing a fantastic bicentennial penny drive, and they're working their way into elementary schools around the state with the goal of using those monies to help conserve the state's founding documents. So, they're working with us at the State Historical Society and Missouri State Archives on that project. They're also working on a large exhibit on the struggle for Missouri statehood that will travel around the state for the next three years. As the additional partners that are in there are all starting to develop their own projects. So, a vast menu of options for sort of thinking through the state's history are being made available to people in the state.

SEAN ROST: Now, in thinking about not only the bicentennial in 2021, but did you or any other organizations in the Bicentennial Alliance really look back to the centennial in 1921 for any ideas or how to plan, perhaps, an event like this?

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Well, I am learning more and more about the centennial as I have been going through this. Because, of course, you look back to see what did we do 100 years ago. As I'm thinking now, my hope is that people are going to look back 100 years ago as they are getting ready to celebrate the Missouri Tri-centennial to look and see what it was we did. What is interesting about the centennial is it was organized around the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia. Very traditional kinds of activities. The big event of the evening was a big Missouri pageant. Cast of thousands. Went on for three hours. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, right, we spend so little time, we don't have three hours to devote to something like this. But also, in some ways, there are some kind of analogous things going on. One of the things that was published was a handbook of suggestions for how to celebrate the centennial which our own director at the time, Floyd Shoemaker—might have been secretary at the time—was involved in because we had a hand in that centennial commemoration as well. And of course, one of them is "how do you find ways to celebrate in your own town." It could be a parade. It could be an exhibit of what they called historical relics. It could be plays. Various things that in some ways those ideas [are] still very

present. I think also exciting, though, was one of the chapters of the handbook was devoted to how to start your historical society. And what's been interesting traveling across the state and visiting with so many historical societies is that they're at this moment of thinking about what does a local historical society do in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. What is our purpose? How do we fit within our community? What is our role? So, in some ways, the questions that were being asked 100 years ago are being asked again and renewed, sort of, at this moment. The bicentennial provides this occasion for doing this.

SEAN ROST: Now thinking about your movements around the state, and visiting with all these organizations, how many counties by the end of this year have you visited with?

MICHAEL SWEENEY: By the end of the year, the goal is to hit all 114 and the independent city of Saint Louis.

SEAN ROST: Oh, wow.

MICHAEL SWEENEY: And I think we will achieve that goal with no problem. There are parts of the state we haven't had an opportunity to get to, and I look forward to finding ways to make connections there. But the other thing is, these are all sort of preliminary visits. We're at a point now where we are starting to schedule return visits. To sort of think through some of our community engagement projects and how people can get involved in a very specific kind of way. So, what would make a good Missouri community legacies project? What would make a good local activity you could do? And trying to use our resources and our thinking and matching up with theirs to figure out what some of these things might look like on the ground for them.

SEAN ROST: Before we return to our conversation, let's take a step back in time with Bob Priddy to an event from this week in history in a "Missouri Minute."

BOB PRIDDY: I'm Bob Priddy with this "Missouri Minute." It was past midnight in Washington D.C. when a man standing at his desk in the third story of a house began to wonder if he was dizzy. The room seemed to be moving, and, indeed it was, because something was happening 1,100 miles away on this December 15th, 1811. The New Madrid Earthquake. The worst recorded earthquake in the world at the time. A shift in the Earth. In three months, the Earth would shake almost 1,900 times. Eight shocks listed as "violent" and ten as "severe." A violent shock would be about fifteen times the intensity of the quake that destroyed San Francisco almost a century later. Some fissures were five miles long. Twenty to thirty feet deep. Entire forests laid down. Gases and odors boiled up from the Earth. Lakes were created. Artist John James Audubon recalled the Earth waved like a field of corn before the breeze. The site of the town of New Madrid was wiped away when the Mississippi River changed course. And for a short time, the river ran backwards. The scars of the great earthquake remain today in southeast Missouri and the surrounding area. Scientists say someday it could all happen again. I'm Bob Priddy for the Center for Missouri Studies.

SEAN ROST: Michael, could you give us kind of a broad overview of how things are shaping up with the bicentennial and preparations for it?

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Yeah. At this point, we're sort of—we have a three legged stool that we're dealing with in some ways. Leg number one is sort of this set of community engagement projects. It's asking the question: What are some things that we can do together? What sort of collaborative things can we do that will become, then, state-wide projects and things we can all enjoy? So, there is sort of that leg. Leg number two is kind of dealing with local and regional commemorations. This question of what do you want to do in your own community, your own county, your own region. The third leg are these other state-wide opportunities for thinking out Missouri history, life, and culture. A lot of these are the projects that the Bicentennial Alliance is getting involved in. So, to mention some of our community engagement projects.

We're working on a new online Missouri Encyclopedia. This is a product that will have a long life past the bicentennial. I often ask people when I start talking about the encyclopedia, I say, "You're familiar with Wikipedia, right?" I go, "Yeah, we know about Wikipedia. This is not Wikipedia." Our goal is to build an authoritative, well-researched guide to Missouri history, life, and culture. As probably a lot of your listeners know, we publish a journal four times a year called *Missouri Historical Review*. We have since 1906. That editorial team is overseeing the encyclopedia project. And, of course, looking in to the big topics. Harry Truman. Missouri Compromise. Mississippi River. My job, moving in to this fall and in to next year, is to visit with communities and ask what would make this thing look complete to you. Who are the people, places, events, and things that shaped your community, shaped your county, shaped your region? Frankly, because what we think they are are not always what they are. By way of example, when I was down in Caruthersville—way down in the Bootheel—visiting with a librarian down there, I asked, "What would you pick for the encyclopedia?" Without skipping a beat she was like, "Oh, the 2006 tornado that came through our community, ripped up our major institutions, and changed the way we interact with each other as a community." For them, it was a community-defining event. Well, Sean, I wouldn't have picked that one. But, she did. And there's lots of certainly other—trying to find things that have been hidden in some ways. I was in Joplin visiting with Brad Belk down at the Joplin History Museum, and, of course, talked about the Civil War. He was like, "You know, we had all these skirmish down here that no one ever talks about. We know about them, but no one else really does." Well, what if we can bring those up to surface? So, part of it is trying to find things that just hadn't been brought to notice before. Part of it is also engaging with communities that never had an opportunity to participate in writing Missouri's history. I think about the Vietnamese population right in Carthage, Missouri. A refugee community dating from the Vietnam War. If we asked the folks there, who are the people, places, and events that shaped your community, I think you'll arrive at really fascinating answers. So, part of it is figuring out what are those topics. And then, it's finding people who are willing to write on them. A lot of the local and regional topics—the editorial team is looking at doing 250 to 1000 words, which is not a tall order. And I think it builds an opportunity to build just an incredible discovery tool that is going to be of use to people long past the bicentennial. But, in some ways, only possible because so many people chose to look in to it and to contribute ideas and to contribute writing. So, there's that.

We're working on a photograph project—My Missouri 2021 Photograph Project—with the goal of sort of capturing Missouri at its bicentennial. Really capturing distinctness of place because talk about a state of just tremendous geographic and cultural diversity. Now, how do we find a way to grab that in 2018 and 2019? So, we're looking to professional and amateur photographers. The nice thing about this is [that] most people carry a phone around with them with a camera. Anyone can participate in this. The goal is to be able to come down to like 200

images that sort of showcase, again, that distinctness of place across the state. And then in 2020 and 2021, we're going to find a way to tour these photographs around the state. So, we've contributed to a larger project, and we get to share a larger project.

Missouri Community Legacies is another one. It's a documentation initiative. Again, the goal is to build a time capsule for the Missouri Bicentennial. So, it's looking to communities to document local traditions, which could be festivals or parades. It could be food traditions. Could be local legends. You know, I think of down in around Newton County, down near Seneca and Neosho and Hornet, is the Spook Light. It's an excellent example of just part of a local tradition that shapes the communities and the county that is there. In addition to that, though, we're looking at documenting meaningful places, which is maybe a park or a cemetery or a building. As I wrote the guidelines, I asked the question: Where do you take a date in your town? That's a meaningful place. And a good example is when I was in Jeff City bringing this they were like, "Oh, well we'd go to Central Dairy." Right? That's where you take a date. That's a meaningful place for Jeff City. And the last category is sort of organizations and institutions. So, what is a year in the life of your church or your synagogue or your mosque look like? Or, a year in the life of your rotary club, or your Lion's Club, or your bowling league. Your Boy or Girl Scout troop. Any of these organizations that sort of sustain community well-being make communities great places to live. So, the idea is to sort of document these in a little written report and some photographs and some supplemental materials. It's capturing things that are contemporary, existing, and on-going. It's a snapshot of the moment. And again, a collective project that will have use long past a bicentennial. You asked about looking at stuff from the centennial. Can you image pulling this out in fifty years? Well, yeah, this is us, in some ways. All of these are community engagement projects. So, things we can all participate in together and things we can all enjoy together.

So, that's leg number one. Leg number two is, again, what might you do in your own community. And we have developed a little endorsement program where you can apply for [a] Missouri 2021 endorsement for your project or program or event. The major criteria being: does it fit the larger goal of Missouri 2021 which is to promote a better understanding of Missouri's communities, counties, regions, people, past, and present. We left the door really wide open. It's not anything goes, but lots of things can fit in that. And we did that because—well, the starting time for most people is no time, no money, and no labor. We did not want lack of resources to be a barrier to participation. So the initial idea was, okay, well, what are you already doing that you can give a bicentennial spin to? I was down in Stockton visiting with the mayor of Stockton. We talked about the Walnut Festival. They're been doing the Walnut Festival for sixty-plus years. They're doing one in 2021. And the mayor's like, "Oh, easy, that year we will theme the Walnut Festival the bicentennial. Perfect." But, also, I tell people, "You may not be interested in anything I'm shilling out, which is also okay. Come up with your own thing." So, for example, Jackson County Historical Society, they recently got a donation of photographs and they have picked as their bicentennial project that they are going to scan and catalog and get online the most historically significant of those images by 2021. That's their project. Also, we are endorsing other commemorations rolling across the state. So, for example, we endorsed Louisiana, Missouri's bicentennial—happening here in 2018—because it promotes a better understanding of Louisiana, Missouri, and Pike County in general. So, that's kind of ways in which we can promote and share the various things that are going on across this state. Again, it's sort of getting back to this whole thing of promoting a better understanding of Missouri's communities, counties, and regions.

The third leg of this thing are other state-wide opportunities. Things that various organizations are putting together that will travel about the state that other people can engage in and enjoy. And there is a whole set of these that are in process. Some of them I've mentioned with the Bicentennial Alliance. Missouri Council for History Education's lesson plans. Free and available to anyone on their website. Various other traveling exhibits. There is a whole set of ideas—about 10,000 great ideas, Sean. Ten thousand great ideas. And I would encourage you to look at the website because as all these things continue to develop the website is the one place—it is a gateway to all things bicentennial. Whether they are things the State Historical Society is doing or not, it is one place where everyone can come together and sort of see the various options that are available to them.

SEAN ROST: If individuals or organizations are interesting in learning more about the bicentennial, how can they reach out to you or how can they look up to find out more?

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Well, there's multiple ways. As you can image with something this large, staying in communication is kind of the biggest struggle. There's lots of ways to keep informed and to keep in the know and to communicate back with us at the State Historical Society as this thing moves forward. Of course, most important is our website: [missouri2021.org](http://missouri2021.org). It is your gateway to all things bicentennial. Both the stuff the State Historical Society is doing, Bicentennial Alliance projects, and all the things that's happening on a local level. So, that's exceeding important. And on the website, you will find a way to subscribe to our Missouri 2021 email list. So, as news happens, that's one way in which we distribute that information. In addition to this, we have a Facebook page and an Instagram account both @Missouri2021. And again, it's another way to sort of share what is going on across the state. Updating people as projects develop and change. Also, as we do outreach activities and we're traveling across the state, its ways to show off various places that we've been. To show off some of amazing communities that we're running in to. So, it provides a venue for doing that as well. We're also on Twitter—@Missouri2021. All of these various tools are sort of staying engaged, staying in communication, and, particularly for those social media platforms, ways to share and to talk back in some ways.

What's been interesting is the bicentennial, more than anything else, is an occasion to do something. I often tell people it's a combination of like New Year's Day and a milestone birthday. I can start my exercise regimen any day of the year, but there's something about January 1st that there's a little extra oomph to get something done. We're treating this occasion—as I've sort of already hinted at—it's a way to promote a better understanding of Missouri's communities, counties, and regions, and, again, with this idea of building a sense of shared investment in the state's future. So, what the occasion is providing a lot of communities is a moment to think about what are the stories we share, what are the stories we tell about ourselves and who is included in those stories? How do we maybe need to rethink the way we talk about ourselves and position ourselves? It's an exciting opportunity to think not just about history, but to think about, in the present, what are the things that we share together. What is it that binds us together as a community? And an opportunity to start trying to chart some of the ways forward. We have made a concerted effort to actually go out and visit with people. Because, we still believe there is something about shaking hands, sharing a laugh around the table, that is of value. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we have all kinds of great and wonderful tools that we can use to engage with one another to share information and to share ideas. But, there is something about—like I

said, sitting across the table and bouncing ideas back and forth. That is something of value, particularly in a state that has—and I guess people could argue with me on this—a very fragmented nature. We certainly talk about an urban/rural divide all the time. But even beyond that, history and geography have divided the state up into various pieces. My family up in northwest Missouri could care less what's going on down in the Ozarks. And our friends down in the Bootheel—cotton fields of the Bootheel—often feel detached from the rest of the state. In some ways, Missouri is a vast borderlands of some sorts. Southern Missouri is sometimes an extension of Arkansas. Northern Missouri is sometimes an extension of Iowa. Saint Louis is right there on the Illinois border. There's a back-and-forth there. I live and grew up in Kansas City, which, again, is sitting on a borderland between Missouri and Kansas. This effects the way Missouri has functioned. And so, the bicentennial provides this opportunity, I think, for thinking out those unique aspects of all those areas and recognizing their value and their very distinctiveness. But also, building this sense of shared investment in this state's future. That because of a border—the border that we are—we share a fate. The more we understand one another and appreciate the various, unique qualities across this state, the better able we are to shape a destiny together.

SEAN ROST: Thank you for being on the *Our Missouri Podcast*, Michael Sweeney.

MICHAEL SWEENEY: Well, I appreciate you inviting me in. I am happy to come back and give an update on bicentennial stuff later.

SEAN ROST: Oh, we look forward to it.

SEAN ROST: Thanks for listening to this week's episode. As always, I am your host, Sean Rost. The show's producer is Brian Austin. The opening and concluding credits are narrated by Kevin Walsh. If you are interested in more of the people, places, culture, and history around our Missouri, check out the following upcoming events:

Benton's Perilous Visions is an exhibit of Thomas Hart Benton artwork from World War II that showcases the artists' interpretation of the anxiety, horror, grief, and resolve that permeated American society during the war years. This exhibit will be on display in the Main Gallery of the State Historical Society of Missouri's Columbia Research Center until Spring 2019.

On February 4<sup>th</sup>, join the State Historical Society of Missouri's Joan Stack and Faith Ordonio in Room 114A of the University of Missouri's Ellis Library for a curators' presentation of *Exodus: Images of Black Migration in Missouri and Beyond, 1866–1940*. This exhibition explores how thousands of African Americans came to and through Missouri while seeking greater political, economic, and social opportunity. Images from the Historical Society's collections offer insights into the movement of African Americans from their first great exodus out of the South after the Civil War to relocations sparked by violence, repression, natural disasters, and the turmoil of the Great Depression. Viewed together, the artwork, including fine art prints by George Caleb Bingham and Thomas Hart Benton, creates an overall picture of American life in an era of dramatic change. This event is sponsored by the University of Missouri Libraries and the MU Black History Month Committee.

The sixty-first annual Missouri Conference on History, hosted by the University of Missouri–Kansas City and Park University and sponsored by the State Historical Society of Missouri, will be held March 6–8, 2019, at the Holiday Inn Country Club Plaza in Kansas City. Paper, panel, and student poster proposals in all fields of history, including public history and historic preservation, are invited. The conference is particularly interested in proposals for complete sessions, including panelists, chair, and commentator. The deadline to submit a proposal is January 6, 2019. This year's conference will also feature a new travel grant program for both undergraduate and graduate students from the Missouri Humanities Council. These travel grants will cover the conference registration fee, lodging at the conference hotel, and up to \$150 of additional related expenses. For more information about the Missouri Conference on History, visit [shsmo.org/mch](http://shsmo.org/mch).

Finally, I want to take a moment to talk about National History Day in Missouri. National History Day in Missouri is a unique opportunity for middle and high school students to explore the past in a creative, hands-on way by producing a documentary, exhibit, paper, performance, or website on a topic of their choosing. Proudly administered by the State Historical Society of Missouri, National History Day in Missouri has over 6,000 students participate in the program each year, with nearly 600 advancing to the state contest at the University of Missouri in April. Through the National History Day in Missouri program, the State Historical Society of Missouri transforms the way kids view history, the world, and themselves. To learn more about National History Day in Missouri, including how to start a program at your own school, please visit [shsmo.org/nhdmo/](http://shsmo.org/nhdmo/). During the month of December, the State Historical Society of Missouri has teamed up with CoMo Gives for an end of the year campaign to support National History Day students. If you are interested in helping Missouri students shine, please visit the CoMo Gives website at [bit.ly/comogives18](http://bit.ly/comogives18).

KEVIN WALSH: Thank you for listening to the *Our Missouri Podcast*. If you would like to learn more about the podcast, including past and future episodes, information about guests, and upcoming events, please visit our website at [shsmo.org/our-missouri](http://shsmo.org/our-missouri).