

Our Missouri Podcast

Title: More Missouri Moments: February 5, 1911

Guest: Bob Priddy

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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. When we record episodes for the podcast, we sometimes hear stories from guests that are really deserving of extra attention. From time to time, we air this bonus material in between our usual Monday premiers in a special segment called "More Missouri Moments." Today, Bob Priddy, who was our guest in Episode 1, takes us back to the night the Missouri State Capitol building burned. February 5th, 1911.

BOB PRIDDY: The capitol that burned in 1911 was, at that point, almost seventy-five years old. Jefferson City became the capital in November of 1826. The seat of government was moved there from its temporary home in Saint Charles. So, there was what was called the Governor's House that was built about where the Governor's Mansion is now and that was the home of the governor who had a small apartment and then they had a House, a Senate chamber, and everything else for state government was in that small building. It burned in 1837. A new capitol was put up, not on that site, but on the hill to the west of where the Governor's Mansion is now in 1840. Although it took another ten years to pay it, to finish it, which was caused a lot of angst, it was pretty inadequate by the time the 1880s rolled around. So, they added wings on both ends of it and expanded it in 1888 [or] 1887. That building faced a different direction than our current capitol. Its axis was what in Jefferson City passes for north and south. Now, Jefferson City, we don't really have a north and south because the city is built along the river and so, actually, north from Jefferson City is Columbia. Most people think Fulton is north of Jefferson City, but it's not. Columbia is north. The capitol faced the river so that when you were coming up the river, which is the way you go to Jefferson City for a good part of its history, you saw the front of the capitol, the face of the capitol, whether you were coming up or down the river. Well, after that burned, the new capitol was built so the axis was different because by then we had streets in Jefferson City and so we wanted to have it line up with the streets.

Well, the capitol that was built in 1840 and then expanded in the 1880s was in terrible shape. It was pretty dilapidated. So, in 1910, the legislature passed a resolution to call for a five million dollar bond issue to build a new capitol. That proposal was on the ballot at the same time there was a statewide prohibition issue on the ballot. Now, Missouri had a local option for prohibition so a lot of our counties were dry already by then. But, the Saint Louis people, of course, didn't want prohibition because that was a big brewing town. And so, they campaigned against all ten of the resolutions that were on the ballot in 1910. Vote "no" on everything just to make sure we didn't get prohibition passed. So, in November of 1910, the voters voted down a bond issue for a new capitol. And then, ninety days later, lightning struck the dome of the capitol and pretty much made the decision for people. We were going to have to have a new building.

It was during the dinner hour about then. People were on their way to evening church services in Jefferson City. A thunderstorm rolled in from the west. One description said, "It was seething lightning." In 1986, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the fire, I talked to an old man who was a four-year-old boy at the time who was visiting his grandmother's house in what is now called Munichberg in Jefferson City. The German settlement on the south side. He happened to be looking out his grandmother's kitchen window when a bolt of lightning went streaking by—he always thought it was a comet—but it was a bolt of lightning that just went streaking by and a second later there was this giant explosion which was the thunder that follows a big lightning bolt. Now, those are the kinds of things that just scare the socks off of anybody. So, a little while later, they were outside and they saw a glow in the lantern of the capitol a few blocks away. About that time, there were some boys who were apparently playing out on the capitol lawn and they noticed some smoke and they turned in the alarm. There is some dispute about who turned in the alarm. Nonetheless, the alarm was turned in.

Jefferson City's horse-drawn fire department called out all of the fire wagons from all of the wards. Go to the capitol. They hooked up hoses to the water system which was semi-adequate. They tried to get a hose up to the dome, but in the capitol expansion of the 1880s, they had built these two wings and the wings had higher roofs than the old building did so they built a new roof on top of the old roof on the old building. They used pine lumber for the roof. The new dome they put up was all pine lumber sheathed in cooper. So, the fire got started in this now very dry pine wood. They were able to get their hose up there, but there's not enough water pressure to do any good. So, this fire just started to eat its way down the dome. As it came down, it increased in flame because the front doors of the building were open and it was starting to draw air in through the front doors and up through this thing like a big chimney. So, this fire kept getting hotter and hotter, and these guys just retreated and retreated, and then it came down and spread over the roof to these dry timbers there. So, that's what doomed the capitol.

About one o'clock in the morning, they thought they might have it under control. Then, the main water main broke. By then, the mayor of Jefferson City, "King" Heinrich, had called Sedalia and asked if they could get some fire equipment to Jefferson City. So, Sedalia quickly assembled a special train, put a fire wagon and a crew on the train, and made it Jefferson City in an hour, which was remarkable. By the time they got to the station, down below the bluff in Jefferson City, the water main had broken. There wasn't anything anybody could do except just let the fire run out, burn itself out. Governor Hadley was having a gathering at the mansion, two blocks away, for reporters. One of his staff people was in the building when the lightning hit, and

the guy called the Governor's Mansion and said, "The place is on fire." So, Hadley and the reporters rushed to the capitol. The members of the legislature in town that night rushed to the capitol. For the next few hours, as the fire burned overhead, they were carrying stuff out. Papers, desks, furniture, files. Everything they could get their arms around. They were carrying it out and basically just throwing it on the lawn so they could rush back in. Finally, it got to the point where the roofs were starting to collapse and they couldn't do anymore of that.

So, there was all this furniture and all these papers out on the lawn. And it was raining, of course, so everything was getting soaked and wet. Finally, early in the morning, the fire had pretty well had burned itself out. It was during the day that Jonas Viles, who was a history professor up here at the University of Missouri, arranged to have a boxcar or two organized in Jefferson City. He went to Jefferson City and gathered up all these papers, loaded them in a boxcar, and brought them up to Columbia. So, we still have at the Historical Society some scorched papers from the capitol fire. The State Archives has a lot of these papers, now. A lot of very important historical documents are scorched, including the original copy of Missouri's Emancipation Proclamation. It's scorched around the edges. So, a lot of the documents were saved, brought up here, dried out, and they eventually wound up in the State Archives. We still have a lot of them [at the State Historical Society of Missouri]. The building, as it was burning, could be seen for miles and miles around. One of the other people that I talked to seventy-five years later was a woman who remembered that there was a flag that was over the small low dome of the original capitol building. It continued to wave for a long time during the fire, until the fire reached the point where it started to burn the ropes. The last thing she saw of that flag was that it was on fire and floating out over the Missouri River. Just an incredible visual image that she had.

Immediately, even during the fire, there were people in the crowd who were circulating rumors that this was the time to move the capital away from Jefferson City. Saint Louis was interested. Saint Louis County was interested. But, then, as now, Saint Louis City and Saint Louis County couldn't get together. And, although there was a very ambitious newspaper publisher in Saint Louis who boomed the capital for University City, that never gained any traction. Turned out, the greatest threat to Jefferson City was a peach farmer from West Plains who wanted the seat of government moved to his farm south of West Plains, which would be about eight or nine miles from the Arkansas border. His name was Jay Torrey. Now, this was not a guy you wanted to mess with. Jay Torrey was a pretty tough dude. Even though it was unlikely that we were going to move the capital to West Plains, he was enough of a threat that he had to be dealt with seriously. Jay Torrey was born in Saint Louis. His brother had a cattle ranch in the bighorn country of Wyoming, and he went out there and worked with his brother for several years. When Wyoming became a state, Jay Torrey became the third Speaker of the House in Wyoming. After he was done there, he went to Washington [D.C.], became a lobbyist, and he helped write one of the first federal bankruptcy laws. As we were getting closer to war with Spain over Cuba, Torrey, being the cowboy that he was, thought the best way to fight a war like this is with a fast-moving group of men who know how to ride and shot from horses—cowboys. So, he had a bill introduced to create a military organization called the "Rough Riders." Now, an ally of an ambitious New York politician hijacked the bill. Got three units created. One of which was commanded by Teddy Roosevelt and Leonard Wood down in Texas. It was that unit that

went to Cuba while Torrey's Rough Riders wound up in Florida and stayed there for the rest of the war.

He came back to Missouri afterwards, got into peach farming at West Plains, and so he had this farm and he had a dream of creating a community there. When the capitol burned, he thought, "Ah-ha, I can get the state capital." So, he campaigned very hard. Now, when we had the election for the new capitol on August the first of 1911, the bond issue was for three-and-a-half million dollars and a capitol to be built in Jefferson City. If that did not get two-thirds vote, then we would come back in November of 1912 and vote on a five million dollar bond issue with no location mentioned. So, all Torrey had to do was convince a third of the voters to vote against the bond in 1911, the issue in 1911, and they would throw everything wide open for 1912 when he might have a better chance. So, he campaigned hard, and the people of Jefferson City, led by the original Sam Cook, campaigned very hard to pass the bond issue. On election night, the votes came in and it got about seventy-five percent. Torrey and Governor Hadley had been good friends up until all of this, and their friendship was blown apart. Some friends finally got them together afterwards, and when Torrey ran for the U.S. Senate in 1918, I think, Hadley endorsed him. Torrey died a couple of years later. But, Jay Torrey, this peach farmer from West Plains, tried mightily to get the capital moved there after that capitol fire of 1911.

That fire, I think, was the best thing that ever happened to Jefferson City because up until that time, including 1896 when there was a statewide vote on moving the capital to Sedalia, Jefferson City was never completely sure that it would continue to be the state capital. But after that vote in 1911, and the construction of the current capitol building, that removed all doubt about where the seat of government was going to be. We've never had a challenge since then in any way, shape, or form. So, that fire turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to Jefferson City, and it guaranteed that we'd be the state capital forever. There were times when one of the people, who remembered the fire many years, could remember as the fire burned itself down the copper cladding on that dome was glowing cherry red because of the heat against the dark stormy sky.

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.