

## *Our Missouri Podcast*

Title: Episode 18: "A History of the Ozarks"

Guest: Brooks Blevins

Air Date: September 16, 2019

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 at the Center for Missouri Studies in Columbia, 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. Welcome to Season 2 of the podcast! We are delighted to have you with us and we look forward to continuing to provide quality content about our Missouri. Today's episode serves as not only the opening of Season 2, but also the start of a multi-part series on "The Ozarks." Sure, you think you know about the Ozarks. The home of Branson, the Baldknobbers, and the Beverly Hillbillies...right? Well, in this series, we'll talk about the Ozarks—a region covering roughly half of Missouri—as a cultural identity as well as a physical place. So, come along for a trip to the Ozarks. Our guest is Brooks Blevins. He holds a PhD in History from the Auburn University, and presently serves as the Noel Boyd Professor of Ozarks Studies at Missouri State University. His book, *A History of the Ozarks, Volume 1: The Old Ozarks*, was published by the University of Illinois Press in 2018. *A History of the Ozarks, Volume 2: The Conflicted Ozarks* will be released in Fall 2019. Welcome to the *Our Missouri Podcast*, Brooks.

BROOKS BLEVINS: Thanks, Sean. Good to be here.

SEAN ROST: Now, we look at your project and its overall perspective on the early Ozarks and the origins of the Ozarks. How did you come about to write this book?

BROOKS BLEVINS: Well, I've spent most of my career researching and writing about the Ozarks. After I took a position as the Professor of Ozark Studies here at Missouri State in Springfield, I realized that—teaching various different courses on the Ozarks—we just really needed a basic history of the Ozarks—that we didn't have a comprehensive history. And so, I sat down nearly four years ago thinking that I was going to write a one volume comprehensive history of the Ozarks. By the time I got the story to the Civil War, I already had a book length manuscript, and I realized this wasn't going exactly the way I'd planned. So, that's why I ended up with a trilogy on the history of the Ozarks. We're talking about Volume 1 of it.

SEAN ROST: Now, in thinking of this trilogy and all of the materials necessary to tell that story, what archives did you visit and what materials were you looking at to help develop this overall story?

BROOKS BLEVINS: Really, I hit just about every archive I could hit within the Ozarks region. We're talking about the State Historical Society of Missouri, the Missouri State Archives, the Missouri State Museum, the Special Collections here at Missouri State, the University of Arkansas, Arkansas State Archives. All of that kind of stuff. And then, I also found quite a few materials in other archives east of the Mississippi [River]. Went to the University of North Carolina, and Duke, and some other places—the Tennessee State Archives. And really, what I tried to do was—especially for this first volume—the pre-Civil War volume—just look at every piece of traditional archival material that a historian would use that had anything to do with the Ozark region. These are letters, diaries, government records, census records—just about anything that I could lay my hands on—church records. All kinds of stuff. I just sort of immersed myself in the traditional sources of the historian, and just kind of see where the story led me. It was just sort of that really cast a wide net approach and do a ground-up history. Of course, it gets more difficult to do that the closer you get and the farther you get into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. There's just too much material out there to do that. But, that's what I was looking at. And then, of course, grounding that in the secondary literature that's out there on the Ozarks, and on Appalachia, and western settlement in the United States, and various things where the Ozarks intersect with broader American History. But, it was just, you know, try to read everything I could possibly read.

SEAN ROST: For people who grow up in Missouri, there's certain portions of the state that they often associate with the Ozarks. We can think of southwest Missouri, portions of southern Missouri, and even like the Lake of the Ozarks. But, where does this word "Ozarks" originate from?

BROOKS BLEVINS: Yeah. The word "Ozarks" doesn't originate from any of those places or any place that even in the least resembles any of those places. It's a weird sort of hodge-podge that brings in various different cultures in this meeting place in the Mississippi Valley. What happens is we know the French are the first Europeans to explore and settle the Mississippi Valley. On their way down the Mississippi [River], they encounter the Illini. They borrow the Illini name for one of the groups of Native Americans that they will encounter farther down the Mississippi River. The group that we now call the Quapaw, the Illini called something that the French heard as the "Arkansas." So, that's where Arkansas comes from. The French set up their first post on the Mississippi River in present-day Arkansas. It's what we call Arkansas Post. By the early 1700s, they had officers there and they were sending letters back to Canada and France. The best theory that we have—the best explanation that we have for where that "Ozarks" comes from is something that the colonial historian Buzz Arnold—Morris Arnold—whose done a lot of colonial Arkansas stuff that he developed several year ago. It's this idea that the French writing from Arkansas Post would sign off their aux—A-U-X—Arkansas. After a while—or "from the land of the Arkansas"—in the land of the Arkansas Indians, basically—after a while, they began abbreviating that sign-off into "ozark" or "ozarks." That caught on, and that phrase—that sort of

new phrase—that the French had adopted from the Illini—their name for the Quapaw—became shorthand for the territory [or] that area west of the Mississippi River. Eventually, it becomes the term that's used to apply to this big swath of land west of the Mississippi River [and] much of the Upland. It's only later—really, it's later in the early 1800s when the U.S. Army cartographers come through and make one of the earliest maps of the broader Mississippi Valley that they now use the Anglicized spelling of this—O-Z-A-R-K. They put Ozark Mountains that comes out in the 1820s. Their Ozark Mountains stretch all the way from basically the Red River that separates Oklahoma from Texas all the way to Saint Louis. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, geographers start to delineate between the Ozark Plateau north of the Arkansas River and the Ouachita Mountains south of the Arkansas River. And really, for the last 120 or so years—maybe even a little more than that—we've separated the two. So, now we have the smaller Ozark region that—very, very broadly speaking—the Ozarks between the Arkansas River on the south, the Missouri River on the north, the Mississippi River on the east, and then it just—you could say the Neosho or Grand River or various things on the west—but, the Ozarks on the west just kind of bleeds into the Great Plains more or less. There's no real stark demarcation for where the Ozarks ends and where it doesn't. But, roughly speaking, those are the boundaries of this place that comes to be called "The Ozarks."

SEAN ROST: I'm kind of interested in that element of the physical boundaries of the Ozarks. As someone who grew up on the south side of the Missouri River, I never really considered myself to be in the Ozarks. And yet, that is technically in that boundary. So, I guess this is more of a cultural question, but, like, how do people define the Ozarks region? Is this this physical location, or is there a cultural element as well?

BROOKS BLEVINS: Well, that's a good question. It really just depends on why you're defining the region [and] what your purpose is. Geographers tends to make maps, and we depend on geographers for making maps. But, in this case, we generally rely on, basically, geological maps. Maps of the physical Ozarks. What it is that separates this physical region from slightly or very different physical regions that surround it. So, yeah, earlier when I was talking about the Ozarks, these are the geological, the geographical boundaries, the physical boundaries of the Ozarks. I wouldn't tell you that you're wrong. I wouldn't insist that you grew up in the Ozarks just because you grew up on the south side of the Missouri River. The fact is we have different cultural boundaries. The way that we define the Ozarks culturally a lot of times it just depends on where people consider themselves to be in the Ozarks. You, obviously, grew up in the physical Ozarks, but didn't consider yourself to be in the Ozarks—to be in the cultural Ozarks. So, that means the boundaries don't exactly match up. For the most part, they do. For the most part, if you're in what the geographers say is the Ozarks, you're in areas that people would consider the Ozarks. You're exceptions to that are really what you're talking about. They tend to be the old German fringe settlements of the Missouri Valley and the Mississippi Valley, and those are the places where people are less likely to culturally [and] historically identify with the Ozarks. Speaking to your point, a few years ago I was in Frohna, Missouri, in Perry County. Again, an old German settlement there. Rolling hills. Beautiful country. A few miles from the Mississippi [River], but you're obviously in the Upland. You're obviously in the physical Ozarks when you're there. I was standing with a woman and I asked the question that I often ask when I'm out traveling around,

especially these marginal areas of the Ozarks. I said, "Do you consider this the Ozarks?" She said, "No." She seemed quite shocked that I would even ask [or] that that would even be a question. I said, "Well, if I told you to go to the Ozarks, where would you go?" She said, "Branson." So, that kind of gives you an idea that a lot of times people have this kind of stereotype of the Ozarks in mind, this cultural concept in mind, and if they don't feel that they fit into that, then they don't. And, of course, in Missouri history, German history is so important to what we do. We know that those pre-Civil War German settlements were, in many ways, just islands in to themselves. They didn't often associate, and often, I think, disassociated with the English speakers in the midst who often didn't share—they certainly didn't share a language, they didn't share a cultural heritage, they were often from different classes, different education levels. And so, I think a lot of that secession of the fringes of the Ozarks—out of the cultural Ozarks—just stems out from that old German settlement and the fact that they had their own identity [and] their own way of defining who they were and where they were, and that didn't include these Upland southerners from the hills of Tennessee and Kentucky and places like that who lived very different lives.

SEAN ROST: Yeah, that comment on Branson is interesting. Thinking about my own life, yeah, if someone were to ask me where the Ozarks are at, I would've probably said the I-44 corridor kind of going on down [south]. So, I think that is kind of interesting both culturally as well as this physical element of people seeing this larger physical Ozarks, but then also this kind of cultural interpretation of where the Ozarks fall. In looking at the Ozarks historically in Missouri history, we think of it being considered the "last settled region of the state." We think of the development of the Mississippi River and the Missouri River and up in what is Little Dixie. Saint Louis and Kansas City as the two corner points there. But, the phrase "settled" is kind of problematic as it tends to assume that this is Americanized settlement. This is the settlement of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Who was living in the Ozarks in these years before Missouri statehood, and how did they view the eventual settlement by Europeans as well as later Anglo-American settlers?

BROOKS BLEVINS: Right. You have a—in the early part of the Ozarks—we're talking about the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the very early 19<sup>th</sup> Century—you've got a pretty diverse cast of people. For one thing, beginning in the Spanish era, especially in the 1780s and 1790s, you have this movement of what in the book I call "Immigrant Indians." These are your displaced Native Americans from east of the Mississippi [River] who start to flow into the region. They start to flow into southeastern Missouri and eventually even make their way all the way over in to southwestern Missouri in to northern Arkansas across the Ozarks beginning with groups like the Shawnees and Delawares and encroaching on what the Osage would consider their territory [and] their hunting ground. Eventually, the Cherokees claim a piece of the Ozarks. The Kickapoos. All these different groups. So, you have in the late 1700s all the way into—really up until about 1830 or so—you have this buildup of these "Immigrant Indians" who are settling the old Osage hunting ground. For the most part, the Osage, though they claim the Ozarks as their own, they really didn't live in the Ozarks. A few of them lived on the very fringes, kind of northwestern fringes of the Ozarks. But, for the most part, they didn't live in the physical Ozarks. So, you have all of these immigrant settlers who are coming in, and by the 1820s, there are so

many of them that in especially southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas and north-central Arkansas you've got probably well over 10,000 of these "Immigrant Indians" and there's this Pan-Indian Movement that develops led by a Shawnee by the name of Quatawapea. It becomes so strong in the 1820s [that] there's probably about a dozen different tribes, a dozen different nations who are involved in this movement that's kind of centered on the White River Valley in north-central, northwest Arkansas. The Cherokees and the Shawnees and the Delawares—all these groups—agree that what their goal is to have an autonomous nation of their own where the U.S. government will leave them alone and let them do what they want to do. So, they decide this is where they want to build this autonomous land, this autonomous government. So, Quatawapea visits William Clark [and] kind of gets his blessing more or less. He goes on to Washington D.C. He visits with President-elect John Quincy Adams. He visits with Vice President-elect John C. Calhoun. He pitches them this idea of basically an Ozark autonomous Indian nation for these various groups who've found themselves kind of thrown together out on what we would consider the frontier of the United States in those days. Of course, it ultimately falls through, not just because the officials in Washington D.C. reject it, but because most of the natives—the Shawnees, the Cherokees, others—who are still living east of the Mississippi [River]—and a lot of this is contingent on them accepting this as well and agreeing to move to this place. They reject Quatawapea's vision. They still think they can hold out in the East and not move, and, of course, that's not going to work. So, it falls through, but it does basically lead just a few years later to the creation of the Indian Territory—Oklahoma. It leads just a few years to really the emptying out of the Ozarks of all these "Immigrant Indian" groups—certainly by the early 1830s—through treaties and other removals. They're pretty much gone. By that point, what had been land that was given or loaned to them by the U.S. government is opened up to white settlement. So, certainly, that's going on in all those years when Missouri's going through territorial stage and early statehood and all that kind of stuff. It's something that certainly we don't often think about happening in the Ozarks, but it's part of that process before white settlers completely take over the region. And then, if you look at the southeastern Missouri Ozarks, that part of the region plays a little more maybe typical Missouri-type role where you have white U.S. settlers and their slaves who are coming in even as early as the 1790s and peopling the southeastern part of the Ozarks by the early 1800s. You've got Moses Austin and Potosi and various pretty substantial settlements that today would be even part of the cultural Ozarks, but we often just kind of bring those into the greater Missouri story because they match the timeline and the chronology of what's happening in Missouri a little bit more than these other stories that come out of the Ozarks.

SEAN ROST: Before we return to our conversation, here's Danielle Griego to talk about the My Missouri 2021 Photograph Project.

DANIELLE GRIEGO: The Missouri Bicentennial provides an occasion for reflecting upon and increasing understanding of various aspects of the State's cultural and geographic landscape. Missouri 2021 invites professional and amateur photographers to capture and share unique and meaningful aspects of place in Missouri. Through the My Missouri 2021 Photograph Project, two hundred photographs will be selected to be part of the permanent Missouri Bicentennial collection at the State Historical Society of Missouri. Together these images will create a

snapshot of the state's physical and cultural landscape during its Bicentennial that will be available to researchers, teachers, and students, and the public for generations to come. To learn more about the My Missouri 2021 Photograph Project, please visit [missouri2021.org/my-missouri](http://missouri2021.org/my-missouri).

SEAN ROST: Now, we can think of really the Ozark region being not only home to—as you mentioned—many Native American groups, but really a borderlands for the Spanish and the French as we get closer into the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century—the Louisiana Purchase and everything like that. How did settlement occur once Missouri gained statehood? How did this settlement occur in the interior and southern Ozarks for—you can think of—foreign-born immigrants as well as those people who are already living in the United States moving farther and farther west in the years leading up to the Civil Wars?

BROOKS BLEVINS: Right. Settlement quickly becomes dominated by a certain kind of settler in the Ozarks. Mainly, settlers coming from the greater Appalachian area back East. Now, you do have a few French Creoles who kind of trickle into the backcountry. There are lead mining communities that spring up in the late 1700s. Old mines. Mine La Motte and some places like that. There's even the French village of Saint Michael, which is now part of Fredericktown, that pops up in the late 1700s. But, the French really don't come any farther into the interior Ozarks than that, and it's really a small number. So, you're typical Upland southern, you know, Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia settler dominates the interior of the Ozarks. It's sort of typical North American settlement patterns. They tend to—water was exceedingly important to those settlers, and they tend to settle the larger streams first and then work their way up the smaller streams. They, for the most part, come overland. The most popular crossing of the Mississippi [River] was just above Cape Girardeau, and then into what would become Jackson. There's just this really heavily traveled road that goes up through Fredericktown and Farmington and on into the interior and to what would eventually would be Rolla. And then, on down into southwest Missouri from that direction. So, you get a lot of people who follow this path. The Springfield Road—southwest Missouri becomes kind of the ultimate destination. You get a lot of people who come by water. Even in southwest Missouri, some of the earliest settlers actually made their way up the White River in Arkansas. Of course, the White River spends some time in southwest Missouri as well. Again, some of the earliest U.S. settlers who came to the Ozarks settled on the White River and just gradually sort of leapfrogged their way up the river from southeast to northwest. So, you get these very typical settlement patterns where you have good water resources. It's really only around mid-century when the high country—this sort of waterless high country—starts to fill in when you've got places in the sub-region of the Ozarks that we call the Central or Salem Plateau, which makes up basically half of the entire region. So, we're talking about much of south-central Missouri and north-central Arkansas. These places that are not terribly fertile. They don't necessarily have the water resources that other places have. Some of these places don't really start filling in until the 1850s or even after the Civil War just because they are seen as not necessarily livable and sort of remote and that kind of thing. And then, as I mentioned earlier, in the antebellum era, your only significant foreign immigration into the Ozarks occurs along the physical fringes of the region, and that's your German immigration that takes place from the 1830s up until the Civil War. We're talking about the Missouri

Valley—Osage and Gasconade and Franklin counties. Some of those places, again, where most of the people wouldn't consider themselves Ozarkers today, but on the fringes. Saint Genevieve and Perry County and Cape [Girardeau] County and some of those places where you have Germans who come directly from Europe to the Ozarks—at least to the physical Ozarks—the edges of the Ozarks. Very few of them make their way into the interior. There are, obviously, examples of people who do that, but the vast majority of them remain on the fringes of the Ozarks.

SEAN ROST: Now, you'd mentioned at the beginning of our conversation that you had worked a lot of material into what you hoped would be a large volume on the Ozarks. And yet, you got to the Civil War and realized that it needed to be much, much more. So, with this being Volume 1 focusing on the early Ozarks up until the Civil War, what will the remaining parts of this series focus in on and what will their timelines be?

BROOKS BLEVINS: Volume 2, which is finished and is slated for a September 2019 release, is the long Civil War era. By that I mean, basically the 1850s into the 1880s. It includes a chapter on slavery in the Ozarks and the secession crisis. Roughly half of the book focuses on the Civil War itself, both the military part of the conflict and there are some significant battles with pretty large armies that take place in the Ozarks almost exclusively within the first twenty months or so of the conflict. And then, the rest of the part on the Civil War focuses on the home front which becomes really the story for the last couple of years of the war. The brutal no man's land nature of the Civil War. This place where you had a very, very divided populace, both in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas. Very divided loyalties. It was just an unsafe place that ultimately many people just decided to leave for their own preservation. And then, the rest of the book focuses on the reconstruction of the Ozarks, both the kind of classic political reconstruction of the region. The struggles between the brand new Republican Party which emerges triumphant in some places in the Ozarks and almost non-existent in other places in the Ozarks. The old Democratic Party which had ruled the roost pretty much all of the antebellum era. And then, I even look at economic and cultural reconstruction as well. I end that volume with a look at the Baldknobbers of southwest Missouri. The vigilante group that really—as historian Lynn Morrow points out—I think they're probably the last gasp of the Civil War, not only in the Ozarks, but in Missouri and maybe anywhere west of the Mississippi [River], even though what they're doing is happening twenty years or more after the official end of the conflict. And then, Volume 3, which I'm still working on, just carries the story into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Volume 3 is the one that really most consciously focuses on what you would call the cultural Ozarks. So, you're old German fringes along the northern and northeastern part of the region won't get hardly as much airplay with Volume 3 as I concentrate more on the social construct of the Ozarks. The Ozarks that people in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century tend to think about when they think about the Ozarks. So, that includes just about everything under the sun that's happened in the last 140 years or so.

SEAN ROST: That all sounds very fascinating. We look forward to those upcoming volumes. You said it's upcoming in September 2019 for Volume 2. And then, at some point, for Volume 3. Thank you very much for joining us today and being on the podcast.

BROOKS BLEVINS: Sure. It's been a pleasure.

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, please check out the State Historical Society of Missouri's website at [shsmo.org](http://shsmo.org).

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).