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Guest: Sara K. Eskridge
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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 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. Today's episode continues our 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 Sara K. Eskridge. She holds a PhD from Louisiana State University, and presently serves as an instructor at Western Governors University. Her recent book, Rube Tube: CBS and Rural Comedy in the Sixties, was published by the University of Missouri Press in 2019. In it, Eskridge examines the rise and fall of so-called "rural comedies"—several of which had ties to Missourian Paul Henning—as television networks like CBS sought to rebrand themselves during the turbulent decade of the 1960s. Welcome to the Our Missouri Podcast, Sara.

SARA ESKRIDGE: Thank you for having me.

SEAN ROST: Could you tell us a little bit about the origins of your project? What really got you interested not only in this topic but also the way that you study and look at it?

SARA ESKRIDGE: Well, I am from the South and so I have always been very interested in the way that people of the South have been portrayed in the media. In graduate school, I was in this class and we were reading a book about sort of the South during the civil rights era and the Cold War. It just struck me as a bit of an outsider's perspective. Even with academics, you often find that the way that the South is approached it often kind of comes from this outsider's perspective that's not always necessarily sympathetic. Not that I think that southerners need nothing but sympathy. But, I do find that a lot of times there's a condescending tone to it. And so, I was really interested to kind of study that from a southerner's perspective and to look at more modern ways that southerners have been portrayed in the media. So, I started looking into different kinds of movies and shows and books. I started looking into rural comedy, which is not something that
I grew up with at all. I had never really watched *The Andy Griffith Show* or *The Beverly Hillbillies*. I just really started getting interested in that, and it became a rabbit hole that opened up into—it was not just about the South, but it became this whole sprawling drama about the Cold War and network politics. It went from there.

SEAN ROST: It's kind of interesting to think about when you said you hadn't really grown up on some of these shows. Some people might look at this and say, "Oh, well, I would watch a show like that and that would draw my interest into a larger project." But, thinking about the research involved with a book like this, where are you going? What archives did you go to? Did you have to watch these shows? What were you kind of doing to get the foundation laid for the overall project?

SARA ESKRIDGE: Well, I looked at a number of different sources. I was lucky enough to have an incredible mentor at my graduate institution who purchased me basically the entire catalogue of rural comedy. Purchased every season of every show that we could get our hands on. And so, I spent about a year and a half spending several hours a day watching television, which sounds maybe more fun than it actually was. When you're actually having to take notes on the episodes, it's much more work than I thought. So, I thought I was getting into something that was going to be like a really fun project, but, you know, even something fun when you have to do it every day it becomes work. In addition to that, there was an incredible resource from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. They have an incredible online database of oral histories and interviews that they have done over the last twenty to thirty years with basically everyone they could find in the television industry. And so, there were some incredible interviews with producers, directors, writers, actors. So, that was an invaluable source. I got a fellowship at UCLA, so I was able to spend several weeks in their archives looking at the various television items that they have. They have a great television catalogue out there, And so, I was able to look through that, in addition to about thirty years' worth of TV Guides, which also is very useful. In addition to that, when looking at the political side of things, I ended up going to the National Archives and to the Library of Congress. They had a lot of information pertaining to various legal battles that CBS had to fight over the years pertaining to their programming.

SEAN ROST: That's interesting. In looking at CBS, people tend to have this general idea—Walter Cronkite, the 60s, and 70s, and the 80s—sometimes CBS gets this identifier of being kind of wholesome family entertainment. But really, as you discuss kind of early on, there is an image problem for CBS as it comes into the Cold War that it has to kind of remedy—it has to fix. So, how did CBS shift from being known as the "Communist Broadcasting System" to eventually known as—well, people called it the "Country Broadcasting System"?

SARA ESKRIDGE: Well, it's such an interesting story because I think CBS started out they kind of considered themselves the tiffany network. They had an incredible newscast led by Edward R. Murrow. They were known for a lot of hard hitting journalism. When television really starts to become popular in American households, they tend to not only have this really great news programming, but they also tend to—they're kind of looking at documentary television, they're kind of really showing some really highbrow entertainment that's not necessarily catching all of the masses, but they're trying to hit a little bit of everything. But, they really do get this
reputation as sort of being the class of the field, as it were. The people that they employ, as it turns out, when the Red Scare happens, they have a higher than average chance of being the employer for some people who are on some pretty extensive and some pretty well broadcast blacklists. There are a number of people, grassroots groups that are going to publish the names of everyone that they can find in entertainment that have connections to communism, or what they perceive as connections to communism. A majority of them—not a majority—but about half of them come from CBS. And so, that's how they get this reputation as being the "Communist Broadcast Network." So, as they move away from that, they try a couple different things. They definitely jump on the westerns bandwagon, which is incredibly popular with all networks. It gets to the point where CBS has about maybe a quarter of their lineup—their entire lineup—is having to do with westerns. That's great. But, parents start to complain about the violence that comes through those shows and what kind of impact that's having on the nation's youth. And so, you start to see congressional hearings and CBS is having to go before Congress to talk about, "Why are you putting so much violence on television?" And then, they also go with the quiz show. They go with the quiz show craze, which is, again, across all three networks. CBS is not alone in promoting that. That seems great, too, because that seems like a great form of Cold War propaganda because you're showing, "Oh, look, intelligence is fun. Intelligence will win you money. Look how smart these wonderful American heroes are." And then, it turns out that those people were given the answers and that the shows were rigged. So, once again, CBS is being hauled before Congress to explain why they participated in this sham that kind of snowed the American public. So, everything that they turn to it seems to eventually blow up in their faces. And then, they kind of take a page out of ABC's book. In the late '50s, early 1960s, they had a very popular show on ABC called The Real McCoys, which was a rural comedy. A fish out of water story about a family that moved from some—I believe it's not really necessarily clear where they're coming from, but it's clear that they are coming from probably the Ozarks. They move to California to start a new life. So, it's kind of a precursor to The Beverly Hillbillies. That show is very popular, and the person who was in charge of programming at CBS in 1960—James Aubrey—he had come from ABC. He sees the popularity of that show. They've got this new person that they've discovered named Andy Griffith. They think, "We can do something similar to this. We can take those western elements of the sheriff as the force of good, and we can put that in a rural setting, and maybe we can mix the southern element with the western element and have lightning in a bottle." That turned out to be true. So, from 1960 to 1965, every year they put at least one new rural comedy on the air and all of them are in the top twenty until they go off the air.

SEAN ROST: That's an impressive streak to not only strike lightning with that—or strike gold—but to continue it on as you said for several years in a row. I think in some ways they're probably looking at their audience and trying to figure out, 1) How to repair this image, 2) How to replicate what other networks are doing—but also kind of thinking about what people might be interested in and what they're watching. But, did geographic and really regional viewing interests as we think of them today with where numbers are coming from, whose watching certain things, and things like that, was that really driving these programming attempts in these early years of television, especially for the country focus?
SARA ESKRIDGE: Well, it's an interesting story because demographics didn't really come into vogue until the late '60s. The types of demographic information that they had was fairly vague. So, when you first have television programming, it is very demographically driven because the programming is coming primarily out of New York City which is one of the most diverse communities in the United States. And so, the people who have television are going to be primarily in New York or in the New York area so there's a very high instance of immigrants. You have a lot of African Americans, You have people from all over the world gathered in this one place. So, this television programming in the early years, it tends to reflect that diversity. You have shows with African Americans. You have shows with Italian Americans. There's Jewish people. A number of different kinds of immigrants, and that's reflected—even with Milton Berle, who was one of TV's first stars. He tended to reflect a more old school vaudevillian aspect that was still very much—it was very New York-centric. It definitely played better with people in the Northeast. And you find, as there are more stations popping up, more stations getting licenses across the country, the FCC is starting to spread into the South and allowing licenses in the South. So, that New York-centric viewing is not playing as well in the Heartland and in the South. And so, they do have to start spreading out and thinking of lowest common denominator. If you've got two or three channels, which thing is going to be the least concerning for all involved. And so, they start looking for—it's not necessarily that they're looking at demographics. They're looking at what is going to be pleasing across the board. And so, that's part of the reason why rural comedy seems so great—because kids can enjoy it. There's definitely nothing controversial or upsetting that you're going to see on a rural comedy. Parents can watch it with their kids. But also, most rural comedies are airing at about nine p.m. central [time]. So, that timing, especially on the East Coast, is kind of putting it out of the range of small children. So, adults are watching this as well.

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.

SEAN ROST: Now, you mentioned some of these shows are going to be non-controversial, but they're going to take place in rural area or, in some cases, in the South with Andy Griffith. And yet, the South in the 1960s—the image that is appearing on news channels anyways at that point—or news shows—is one of the larger confrontation and divide over the civil rights struggle. So, was there criticism? Did critics attack CBS for shows that focus on this wholesome
southern life without controversy and ignoring the reality of what is going on in some aspects in parts of the South?

SARA ESKRIDGE: Well, I'll you what, I can't say for sure that it didn't happen. But, if they did that, I couldn't find it. I looked at a lot of popular publications at the time to look for some sort of review that kind of reflected that sort of complete lack of connection with reality, and they don't. There's a lot of reasons that the critics panned rural comedy, but that disconnection is not one of them. And so, that leads me to belief that that disconnection was actually a feature and not a bug in these shows. That this was a form of escapism. That this was not meant to connect them to the South of the '60s. But even Andy Griffith, himself, said, "This was not the South of the '60s that we were trying to portray. It's the South of the '30s." And so, it's really—even the show which—it sparked a lot of nostalgia even at the time, but it's for a nostalgia for what he perceived to be the South of his own youth. Now, Mayberry is supposed to be based on Mount Airy, North Carolina, which is where Andy Griffith grew up. And so, that's his version of that. Mount Airy had a very active NAACP chapter in the 1960s, and it's less than an hour away from Greensboro. The Andy Griffith Show aired only a couple months after the Greensboro sit-ins. So, there's a very active civil rights movement happening in North Carolina, and that was active there even when Andy Griffith was younger. But, he did not necessarily know about that, and, if he did, he chose not to portray that at all.

SEAN ROST: That's interesting to think about—yeah, NAACP activism in the South, yeah, at a time when he would have been growing up in the '30s—and then that not being reflective, certainly, in the show. But, thinking of The Andy Griffith Show and it being known as being connected with North Carolina—and a lot of this rural television focuses on a place like North Carolina, but then you think of the Beverly Hillbillies going to California, or in some cases, other shows depicting rural life versus city life. But, you mentioned with The Real McCoys earlier about this people possibly coming from the Ozarks. Were there a lot of shows that depicted Ozark culture or people coming from the Ozarks and putting that as a popular location setting for some of these shows?

SARA ESKRIDGE: Yeah, well, Paul Henning was responsible for almost all of the Ozark-centric programming that was on CBS. He had a trilogy and he called it his "Rural Trilogy." It was The Beverly Hillbillies, Petticoat Junction, and Green Acres. And so, all of these are, in theory, supposed to exist in the same universe. That was not necessarily connected—it was not connected to The Real McCoys in any way. I think Paul Henning might have written something for The Real McCoys at some point, but he was not heavily involved in that show at all. There were a couple of shows prior to that that kind of featured brief kind of cameo appearances by people who were supposed to be from the Ozarks. I know that Bob Cummings had a recurring character on his program—sort of a batty uncle who lived in the Ozarks and flew a biplane from World War I. He would sort of fly in for an episode and then leave. Also, I Love Lucy featured Tennessee Ernie Ford, who, I think, was supposed to be an Ozark character. He was featured for a couple of episodes, which is really unusual for I Love Lucy because they never had a guest star come on more than once. I think Tennessee Ernie Ford was on two or three times. So, that character must have been very popular. So, those characters when they show up on other shows
they're very popular, which may have been why Paul Henning was drawing on his own childhood in Missouri and felt like that could be potentially comedic gold.

SEAN ROST: This may be difficult to answer, but, is there a particular reason that you found of why an Ozark character was kind of portrayed in some of these shows and not like, let's say, a southerner stereotype or a—you could think a southwest or something like that—is there a reason why Ozark was kind of a theme character to come out of this?

SARA ESKRIDGE: I'm not really sure. It's unclear. I know that with Henning he's using Ozarks because that's where he's from, or that's the connection that he had. If he wasn't directly from there, then he is definitely spending a lot of time in the Ozarks. So, he was familiar with it. What we find is that it's really one of the—in terms of like a place that's maybe hitting that sweet spot of being kind of associated with hillbilly culture, southern culture, also kind of Midwestern—so it's kind of hitting the sweet spot of the Heartland where it's touching a large number of demographics at the same time. That might make it particularly attractive. I know that Paul Henning considered his Ozark characters—he considered Missouri to be definitely southern. I know that Missouri is one of these places where it's kind of an interesting dichotomy where some people do consider it southern, and others don't. But, as far as Henning was concerned, he did consider that southern, or at least it would kind of ring those bells when people are watching. You would see that and wouldn't necessarily say, "Okay, well, that's Missouri." You would say, "Okay, that comes across as southern."

SEAN ROST: Yeah. That's very true. Missouri is the contested space between southern, midwestern, and western. So, it certainly is each person's opinion about how Missouri is defined. So, Henning certainly seeing it as southern would fit into some of the portrayals of characters as he's creating them. Thinking of Paul Henning being a Missourian—someone who is creating characters from Missouri, from the Ozarks, for these shows. What is his career path through television at this time? He has that trilogy you mentioned of Green Acres, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Petticoat Junction, but how does he become such a prominent writer and really creator of these shows in the 1960s?

SARA ESKRIDGE: Well, you find that rural comedy seems to be a very incestuous world. A lot of these folks who become bigger characters—you actually find that the writers and the producers and the actors, sometimes they're interchangeable. For example, there's a character on Andy Griffith, Ernest T. Bass, who was actually a writer on the show and he was also a writer on The Real McCoys. And so, it's kind of like the writers and the actors, they all kind of take on different jobs depending on what show they're on. So, with Paul Henning, he was someone who had been sort of a staff writer for some earlier rural comedies, including The Real McCoys, and had written a couple of episodes. But, as he developed that, it's almost like you kind of get typecast as a writer. And so, that's a genre that he kind of demonstrated that he had—what is the word that I'm looking for—he clearly had a gift for writing that because he, in theory, [was] writing what he knew and kind of just emphasizing it and exaggerating it. And so, he's taking that expertise and based on that he said that he kind of developed—he didn't start out developing a trilogy. I think he really got inspired by The Real McCoys, quite honestly, because if you look at The Beverly Hillbillies, which is a fish out of water story about a family moving from Midwest
and moving to California to start a new life. It's kind of the same show. In fact, there's some imagery in *The Beverly Hillbillies* that actually comes almost directly from shots in *The Real McCoys*. So, there's definitely a lot of borrowing from that concept. So, he's on that show. He's writing on that show. He kind of decides to make, basically, his take on *The Real McCoys*—just on CBS. That ends up being their most popular show.

SEAN ROST: Now, thinking about these shows overall, and certainly there was a long ride of success there in the early-to-mid 1960s, but it couldn't last forever. So, how does this backlash develop? How does this end to rural comedies start out in what eventually becomes the "Rural Purge" by the end of the 1960s?

SARA ESKRIDGE: Yeah, well, it's an interesting story and there's a couple of different things that are happening here. One is that demographics do start becoming more important. So, initially, in the early '60s, what they were looking at is number of viewers. Just sheer number of viewers. They were looking for that at least thirty-five percent market share, which meant that you were dominating that three station market. But, as time goes on, they start to realize, "Well, let's look at who is actually watching. Who is buying the products that we're advertising on the commercials on these shows?" So, they start to look at that and they realize, "Well, we do have a lot of older people watching rural comedy. We have a lot of children watching. Parents are watching." But, in terms of that coveted eighteen to thirty-four demographic, which is just becoming popular, and just kind of becoming popularized in the ad industry, that's not necessarily who is watching. It's not necessarily which markets because we find that rural comedy was popular across all markets. In fact, more so in the Northwest than in the South, even. But, they found that if they want upwardly mobile younger professionals—sort of the yuppie market if you will—that's not who rural comedy is attracting. They found that that market they're virtually tuning out altogether because they're not really finding the programming that they want. So, CBS is starting to push more toward that younger, urban market. At the same time, you also have baby boomers who grew up watching rural comedy, but by 1970 or so, a lot of them are approaching adulthood—if they're not there, they are in their early twenties. And so, they find that that market is coveted because there are more of them, of that age group, than there had ever been before. And, of course, that number is only going to keep growing in the early '70s as more and more boomers reach adulthood. They want that boomer market, but the boomers seem really played out. They're really jaded, because these are the same kids that were involved in—they watched those shows and then went to college, participated in the civil rights movement, participated in the anti-war movement, the women's movement, what have you, and they're a little jaded by this nostalgia, picture perfect—these family comedies, these rural comedies that have been dominating TV for the better part of the decade. They're not really watching that. They don't connect with it at all. They want something that connects with their reality. And so, that's partly why you get things like *All in the Family*, which is more of sort of the generational comedy about that generation gap between the younger people and their parents who are more from that generation who would rather watch Andy Griffith. And so, those two things combined. The growing up of the baby boomers, and that move towards paying more attention to demographics. Those two things sound the death knell of rural comedy.
SEAN ROST: Did any shows survive the "Rural Purge"? Did anything make it past 1970, or is it a complete breakdown of all those shows?

SARA ESKRIDGE: I think *Green Acres* made it the longest. I think they made to maybe 1972. I would have to check on that. You might have to check on that. But, I think *Green Acres* made it the longest, and they were cancelled in '72. But, other than that, almost every rural comedy got cancelled in one fell swoop over the course of two seasons—1970 and 1971.

SEAN ROST: Wow, okay, that is quite a substantial cut. What about someone like Paul Henning, since we brought him up before? Does he make it through this "Rural Purge" and continue on with television, or what is his role after this?

SARA ESKRIDGE: He had a production company called Filmways, and he did produce other shows other than rural comedies, but they also kind of fell into that market. For example, Filmways produced *Mister Ed*, which in some ways, I guess, because there's a horse in it, you could say it's semi-rural. But, that's not really what people think of when they think of *Mister Ed*. He was more producing those comedies that came out in the mid-'60s that were sort of more in that *Green Acres* mold of like there's sort of a surreal element to it and they usually had kind of a gimmick that they centered around. So, he went on to do a few of those, but, honestly, I did not follow his career past the "Rural Purge" so I can't tell you what became of him, unfortunately.

SEAN ROST: I really enjoyed the book. I was going through everything and kind of thinking a lot about what I've heard people talk about growing up in Missouri about how some of the characters from these shows had come back to fairs and various events and had this connection to people. That they would go to like an airport in Vichy, Missouri, and there'd be—I can't think of her name—the grandmother from *The Beverly Hillbillies* would be at one of the shows there.

SARA ESKRIDGE: Oh, yeah.

SEAN ROST: They would have a meet-and-greet signing session, and how there was this—even into the '80s and the '90s—there was this still beloved element of people going all this way to travel to these various places to see these people.

SARA ESKRIDGE: Well, there's an interesting thing that happens, actually, and there's a little bit of a story behind that because as part of their contracts a lot of these characters—a lot of these actors—that were on these rural comedies, it was actually stipulated that they couldn't do press for the shows unless they were in character. So, a lot of times you would see characters from *The Beverly Hillbillies* or—let's see—maybe *Petticoat Junction*. A lot of times they would sort of show up in character to things. And so, you find that they get very much pigeon-holed into those roles because they are blurring that line between reality and television. And so, it's almost coming across like, "Okay. Well, you know, I actually am Daisy Mae Moses from the Ozarks," as opposed to, "I'm Irene Ryan a veteran character actress who has been in dozens of productions." She gets typecast because that's how she's literally presenting herself to the public when she's not on *The Beverly Hillbillies* because she's required to do so by contract. And so, a lot of those characters have trouble finding work afterward—with few notable exceptions. Obviously, Andy Griffith and Buddy Ebsen, they go on to lucrative careers playing Barnaby
Jones and Matlock. But, for the most part, those people can only earn a living as those characters going forward. And so, they often will make appearances and doing so throughout most of their lives.

SEAN ROST: It's really fascinating to think about that. Yeah. The fear of being typecast and how much of a reality that actually was for some of these people. That's very interesting.

SARA ESKRIDGE: Yeah. I mean, CBS is literally making it so that you can't not get typecast. They're not giving you any opportunity to find a market outside of that character because you have to be that character in public at all times.

SEAN ROST: And when the purge comes, it makes that much more difficult to re-invent yourself and become a new character.

SARA ESKRIDGE: Exactly. And it's fortunate that these shows have maintained such popularity over time because it has given those people who might not have been able to find work otherwise, they've been able to kind of continue a career just as a TV personality.

SEAN ROST: That's very true. Yeah. That's very true. I mean, a lot of these shows are — yeah—still on in syndication on various channels. I think there's channels now that are just dedicated simply to a lot of the shows from the '60s and the '70s to just running them on constant loop on a daily basis. So, I think, they certainly—they live on longer than, in some cases, their original reign. They have been successful.

SARA ESKRIDGE: Absolutely. And, a lot of these shows have internet watching groups like there's an "Andy Griffith Show Rerun Watchers Club." There's some that are dedicated to The Beverly Hillbillies. There is a Bible study for The Andy Griffith Show so that people can buy that for their Sunday School class. So, there's all these different little niches. And then now, I've looked on social media and there's watching groups for all of these. So, it seems to be transcending the type of media that's popular for the day. It's kind of moving with the technology and with the social spaces as we create them.

SEAN ROST: It's interesting to think about, yeah, in a digital age how these things are preserved. And how they've been not only celebrated and preserved, but also how people still remember them, and focus on them, and study them even into modern day.

SARA ESKRIDGE: Well, the fascinating thing about it is that—again, this is not something I grew up with, but virtually everyone that I knew has—their grandparents—they watched it with their grandparents, but they have some memory of it. So, you've got people who have been watching this for seventy years now—these shows have been on the air, and, regardless of generation, they say, "It reminds me of my childhood." So, it seem to—that's three generations. It seems to transcend generation, and regardless of how old you were when you started watching or how old the show was when you started watching, it seems timeless.

SEAN ROST: What is your current project? What are you working on now for the steps forward?
SARA ESKRIDGE: I am trying to figure out my next steps. I've made some inroads into a biography of Andy Griffith because I think he is just an utterly fascinating character who was sort of someone who projects a version of the South that is not really his reality at all. Someone who kind of comes across as sort of a southern, common sense, everyman, but, actually, he's a very well educated, shrewd, person who is, actually, not all that nice in real life. But, that's not his persona at all. And so, I've found that fascinating, but I'm still kind of feeling it out. Any suggestions are welcome.

SEAN ROST: Well, thank you very much for joining us today and for being on the podcast.

SARA ESKRIDGE: Of course. Thank you so much for having me.

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.

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