

Our Missouri Podcast

Title: Episode 21: "Father of Route 66"

Guest: Susan Croce Kelly

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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 today is Susan Croce Kelly. Presently, she serves as managing editor of *OzarkWatch Magazine*. She has also spoken and written extensively on the history of Route 66, including *Route 66: The Highway and Its People*—and our focus for today—*Father of Route 66: The Story of Cy Avery*—both published by the University of Oklahoma Press. Welcome to the Our Missouri Podcast, Susan.

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: Thank you. Thank you for letting me be here.

SEAN ROST: Now, what first drew your interest to really the history of Route 66?

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: Actually, a couple of things. My mother, of course, was the emphasis, I guess. She grew up in southwest Missouri in Dade County. Her grandfather had a farm that fronted on Route 66. I grew up in Kirkwood, and when I was really little—like four or five—I can remember her saying that the blacktop road a couple of blocks from our house was the most famous road in the world. At four or five, you begin to know that your parents are fallible. I remember listening to that and thinking [makes noise], "That's not true. She's just telling me that." Well, of course, she was right. Over the years when we would go back to see family in Springfield, I would hear stories about the highway which were kind of fascinating. Later, as an adult, I was a reporter in Springfield, and there's a piece of the old highway that goes back like a time machine into the 1930s from Halltown over to Carthage. Old Route 66—the interstate is south of there. When I was a reporter, I would hear stories about the gangsters coming in from Oklahoma and different things about Route 66. I would ask people, "Well, tell me more." They would say, "Well, there's still people that remember." So, I came away from

there thinking there really needs to be a book about this old road, but it also needs to have really good pictures and I wasn't that good of a photographer. Later, I met a photographer who was enchanted by the architecture of the old buildings. Between her picture-taking and my former journalism, I said, "We've got to talk to the people inside those buildings that you want to take pictures of." That was a great combination because we found businesses on Route 66 and we'd go in and say, "Tell us about your business." Well, that's not threatening. Besides, you might buy something. And then, pretty soon we'd hear about their lives. We researched for about seven years. We traveled, and she took pictures, and I interviewed people. We learned that Route 66 was all about business, and we ended up advising people—a television crew from England and other people who were trying to knock on doors along Route 66. Well, if you just live along Route 66, you're raising kids, going to work, not paying a whole lot of attention. But, if you're running a gas station or a café, boy, you pay attention to everything going on on that highway because you want every one of those people to come in and spend money with you. So, that's a really long answer, but that's kind of how it evolved from just kind of a fascination with the stories that I'd heard into a real fascination with what the road was all about.

SEAN ROST: It really has that kind of long history of—as you mentioned—the importance of life along the highway and then later on people seeing it go by and not thinking so much about it. But, where did the origins really of this book *Father of Route 66* come from? How did you move from this earlier work documenting the landscape to writing about someone who was so crucial in its construction?

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: When we were interviewing the café owners and the snake farm owners and the motel people, it became apparent that this was a really important road. It also was real clear that it went through western Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle and the Illinois cornfields, and you say, "Why is this road important?" Because, it's not always in the prettiest parts of the United States. We began to ask people, "How did Route 66—why is this—what is it about this highway?" A couple people told us, and they used the same words, "Cy Avery invented Route 66." Well, we had to go back and find out what that meant. I became fascinated with Cy. We learned enough about him when we did the first book to be able to let people know that he was Oklahoma highway commissioner in the 1920s and was involved in a national group that laid out the national highway system and making sure that one major road went from Los Angeles to Chicago. Later, he gave the road the number sixty-six after a big fight in Washington [D.C.], which was kind of interesting. And then, he and a fellow in Springfield determined that if you're going to have a road and you want people to travel it, it has to be paved and people have to know about it. They started the Route 66 Association and began to publicize the highway—the Main Street of America. So, that is all in nutshell in the first book. But, over the years, I thought, you know, I bet Cy Avery's life would make a good novel. I just think he was a really fascinating guy and it was a fascinating time. It was like now, when the whole world was changing, except it was cars and mechanical things, unlike now it's the electronic world. I'm a writer for hire. I'm a journalist. I tried writing a novel and it didn't work. But, I turned it into a biography of Cy and the times that he lived in.

SEAN ROST: In preparing for that book and prepping for it, obviously, you have to know about his life. You have to know about the construction of the road. So, where did you go in terms of archives and research to find out about his life and about what he was doing to help bring about Route 66?

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: Well, I was really lucky because twenty years before I had written the first book. So, I had seven years of research back before the internet which involved talking to people and then when somebody would tell me something that involved a date or a place or an important person I'd have to go back to the libraries to verify it. Mostly, it was the Saint Louis Public Library and the Washington University Library. I can remember sitting on the floor reading oil company publications—gas station journal where they talked about you can really get people into your gas station if you have clean restrooms or free ice water. I began to learn about the culture of the highway. When I then launched my investigations into Cy's life for the biography, I was fortunate enough to meet three of his grandchildren. Find out, his papers were at Oklahoma State University in Tulsa. That was the core of my research was the OSU archives. Then, Cy's grandson, who was named after him, Cyrus Stevens Avery III—Stevens was a big help. I also spent time at the National Archive in Washington [D.C.] and with some road historians at the Smithsonian. Those are the main places that I did research.

SEAN ROST: Okay. Now, from the very beginning—as we kind shift into the book a little bit—roads are obviously important. If you are going to write a book about the person behind Route 66, a road is going to be very important. But, the road that Cy Avery took to Missouri and really to what becomes Oklahoma—what is called Indian Territory at the time—from his home in Pennsylvania is quite a long journey. So, how does he make that trip from Pennsylvania into the Ozarks?

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: According to his family—and that's the only information that I have—he and his father—I should backtrack. He was born in 1871, and in 1873 there was a huge depression in the United States. That's when the railroads and the banks all went bust. His father lost his job—or lost his income—and they decided that going west would be the best thing for the family. So, when Cy was thirteen, he and his dad took a covered wagon and moved west. They went down through southwest Missouri to the very southwest corner and went across thirty miles into Indian Territory near what is now Jay, Oklahoma—a very small town. They bought property that had belonged to Stand Watie—I think is how you say it. He was a Cherokee Indian who had been a Civil War general—a Confederate Civil War general. That was the property. That's where he grew up until his mother and sisters came about four years later, I think. His mother lived there for a year and then decided they needed to go back to "civilization" and they moved to Noel, Missouri, in McDonald County. But, he came in a covered wagon first. So, he experienced bad roads with oxen and horses and mud and other wagons back before we had automobiles. And then, as he grew up, and cars came along, then he continued to experience bad roads. I'm sure that the need for better roads was part of his life from the time he was twelve or thirteen.

SEAN ROST: Yeah. And really, as he becomes a young adult and begins to get kind of active in portions of the Ozarks, there is a campaign going on in Missouri to "Pull Missouri Out of the

Mud." Tell us a little bit about that campaign and what it was trying to do to improve transportation.

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: He was living in Oklahoma. He lived in Vinita, and then Tulsa. He went over to visit his mother in Noel and the whole state was out grading roads and smoothing roads and improving the roads. At those days, there were no paved cross-country roads. Cities had brick roads and little bits of pavement here and there, but the cross-country roads were all dirt or dirt and gravel. You add a car to a muddy road and then you add ten cars to a muddy road, it gets worse and worse and worse. And so, there was kind of an obsession in the southeast and the west to improve the roads. When Cy got to Missouri, like I said, the governor had proclaimed a day to get Missouri out of the mud—a holiday. 250,000 men gave up their jobs for the day to get out and do road work. People brought in—companies volunteered road grading equipment and pickaxes and all the rest of things so that the roads could be improved. The governor of Kansas came over, and he and the governor of Missouri drove, I think, a road grader for a little while. Long enough to get their pictures in the paper. They got national publicity. Apparently, getting the country out of the mud was a known phrase by that time, but this was apparently either the first state or one of the first states that went to work in a broad based way to do something about it. They had the idea that if they could get people out and grade the roads and make the dirt pack down, then everything would be well. Of course, that didn't turn out to be true. But, Missouri people were really behind the idea of better roads.

SEAN ROST: Before we return to our conversation, here's Danielle Griego.

DANIELLE GRIEGO: The sixty-second annual Missouri Conference on History, hosted by Lindenwood University and sponsored by the State Historical Society of Missouri, will be held March 11-13, 2020, at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel in Chesterfield. 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. All proposals should be submitted no later than November 1, 2019. For more information about the Missouri Conference on History, please visit shsmo.org/mch. Start networking with other history professionals now on social media by using #mch2020.

SEAN ROST: Now, the fact that he's kind of in Oklahoma—I mean, he has family in Missouri, but he lives in Oklahoma—how did that campaign as well as other national efforts to create more standard roadways inspire his own work on construction and highways and, really, infrastructure at the time?

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: Right. Cy had been involved with the Good Roads Association. That was kind of the national grassroots groups across the country that were pushing and, eventually, lobbying for better roads. They wanted Congress to spend money, and Congress wasn't sure that they had the right to spend money for things they saw as internal state issues. But, as concrete paving became available, it was too expensive for anybody but the federal government to be able to afford. So, that's just a little bit of background. But, in Missouri, when Cy was there—like I said, this got all kinds of publicity and he was mightily impressed. He was also impressed with

one of the pieces of equipment people were using which was called the split-log drag. It had been invented in 1907 by a guy up in north Missouri named Ward King. What King had done was take logs, split them in half, and hook them to chains which were pulled behind horses with the flat half of the logs facing the horses. If the roads were damp—and I know this—people who remembered working with them said, "Not dry and not real muddy." But, if the roads were damp, they could smooth out of the roads, flatten them out, fill in the holes by dragging these drags across the mud—damp dirt. Cy went home and brought at least one split-log drag, plus instructions for making more, which he put to work in Tulsa County where he was chief county commissioner. He tried to talk the governor of Oklahoma into having an "Out of the Mud" Day. [He] didn't get very far, but he did get several counties in Oklahoma to go to work and they considered it a very successful day in road improvement.

As I mentioned, as concrete roads became available—well, the first concrete cross-country pavement was laid in 1909 in Wayne County, Michigan—that's where Detroit is so it's not much of a surprise. But, that was the year after the Model T was introduced. So, you can tell roads were having to catch-up. We had the progress in transportation ability, but we didn't have the progress in the roads that all these cars and other vehicles could travel on. The road people in Michigan laid a couple miles of concrete road in Wayne County, and it became kind of a national showplace for people like Cy who were working in other states to come and look and see if concrete roads were really as good as everybody said. So, he came back and sponsored some road bond bills for Tulsa County. He became very active in road building in Oklahoma and well known. About this same time, you had—I call them the "Do-It-Yourself Highways." The Old Trails Highways. The Lincoln Highway. The Jefferson Highway. Cy was involved with one called the Ozark Trail Association. People saying, "We've had enough. We are going to make the roads better." People in little towns or big towns would get together and they'd say, "Okay. We need a road from Columbia to Jefferson City. A good road." And so, they would call it, maybe, the "Jefferson City-Columbia Snowball Road." I don't know—something. They would enlist people along the way in the communities to divvy up money for advertising and promotion and get people to volunteer to grade the roads and keep them passable. There were about 200 of those roads in the country by the time we began to get national highways. But, Cy was involved with a number of those, and because of that, we became more and more well known.

In 1925, he was appointed Oklahoma's first state highway commissioner. Now, you have to remember, when Cy started this Oklahoma wasn't even a state. In 1907, you had Oklahoma statehood. So, it took the legislature a while to decide that highways were a place that they needed to spend money. But, in 1924-25, he was appointed Oklahoma state highway commissioner and that put him in a position to build the roads all over the state, which he did. And then, he was on a national committee in a group called the American Association of State Highway Officials, which was people like him and state highway engineers from all over the United States who had a chance to get together in Washington [D.C.] and talk about road conditions and what they could do. Share information about what they had done that worked and what didn't work. But, one of things that they decided was that it was past time for the nation to work together to develop highways so that people could get from California to New York, or from Texas to Chicago, or from Topeka to Memphis, without getting lost because up to that time

each state had its own boundaries for the roads. In 1916, the feds voted funds for the first federal highway bill and they appointed road paving matching funds to the states, but they didn't say where those roads would go. So, you had a situation where you might be driving north through Missouri going to Minneapolis, except when you got to the north border the pavement would stop and in Iowa they had built a north/south road somewhere else. Besides that, there was no rules for national signage. So, people got lost all the time, and they got stuck in the mud and they had to be pulled out by oxen and horses and it was still a mess.

In 1925, these state officials—if you can still follow this convoluted description—petitioned the Secretary of Agriculture and said, "We need a national highway system and we need to work together to get it done." He appointed two dozen men—they were all men in those days—to a joint board to take the roads that existed, to take the maps, and figure out which ones would make the best thoroughfares across the country—north, south, east, west. Cy was one of the twenty-five men. Another one was Frank Sheets, who was a highway engineer from Illinois. Another one was a man named [B.H.] Piepmeier, who was a state highway engineer in Missouri. So, you have Oklahoma, Missouri, and Illinois—sounds like a roadway, doesn't it? Cy was part of the group that would go around and they'd talk to state highway officials in the different regions of the country, and they developed a national map that had the north/south roads and the east/west roads—the key ones.

When the map was finished, one of the roads, instead of going from California to the East Coast, it went from California to Chicago. It went through Tulsa, and Springfield, and Saint Louis, and on up to Chicago. Everybody seemed to be fine with that. And then, Cy was put on a committee for numbering the roads. They had decided that the old name roads were, A) cumbersome; and B) that you get into all kinds of politics if you pick some of the name roads and didn't pick some of the other name roads. So, they just decided that they would number the roads. So, Cy was one of five men on a committee to number the main roads, and they decided that the east/west roads would be known—the major east/west roads would end in "0"—10, 20, 30, 40, 50, so forth. So you knew if you were on Highway 10 you would get from one side of the country to the other. The north/south roads, because there were more of them, would end in "5" or "1." So, you had Highway 1 on the East Coast and Highway 101 on the West Coast, and then all the other numbers in between. They met in Saint Louis to do the numbering. When they got finished, Cy's road from Los Angeles to Chicago had number 60—6-0, which had been decided that those would be the numbers that would go all the way across the country. But, again, nobody seemed to care, and they voted at the national association to accept the map [and] to accept the road numbers. Then, they sent it out to the states for final approval.

When the governor of Kentucky saw the map, he went nuts because there was no "0" ending highway going through Kentucky. The "0" ending highway that should have gone through Kentucky went to Chicago. This was a big—it's hard to believe that this could be a big deal today, but it was a huge deal at that time because roads were so very important. The governor of Kentucky first said that the mob must be involved if Chicago was the end of the road. And then, he said Kentucky would just ignore the new map and just forget about the whole thing. Then, he stormed to Washington [D.C.] and got ahold of the Kentucky senators and

congressmen and went to the Federal Bureau of Public Roads and everybody else that he could find and said that this was a terrible thing [and] that Kentucky was an old and honorable state and it was being besmirched because it didn't have a "0" ending highway. Well, then, of course, the committee—the Federal Bureau of Public Roads and the committee—said, "Well, we'll change it to [Highway] 62 for Cy Avery's road and you can have 60." Well, then Cy, and Piepmeier, and Sheets went to Washington [D.C.] and got their congressmen involved and their senators involved, and this fight went on for about six months. From what I know of Washington, probably everything else stopped. I don't know about that. But, it was a big deal.

Finally, the head of the Bureau of Public Roads wrote to Cy—or the second in command, actually—and he said, "Look, we have been with you all this time. We've done whatever you wanted. But, if Congress gets any more involved in this uproar over the number of the highways, we're not going to have a federal highway system. I don't think anybody wants that. Can't you do something?" So, Cy let it stew for another month and a half or so, and then he and Mr. Piepmeier in Missouri met in Springfield to try to figure out what to do. Cy had the state highway engineer from Oklahoma there as well. They thought about it and talked about it. Cy wrote about this, but he was a little vague. I don't know exactly what they said, but they decided that probably politics would prevail and the governor of Kentucky would get highway number 60 eventually. So, they said, "Alright. He can have 60." Then, Cy turned around to his state highway engineer and said, "Well, we've numbered all these highways, what numbers are left?" Because, they had done the major roads and then the secondary roads and so forth. This guy went through the numbers that were left over—the two digit numbers—and he said, "What about 66?" I guess they talked about it a little bit and decided 66 sounded pretty good, and that was where the highway number came from. It was kind of I guess you'd say an afterthought, but it worked pretty well.

SEAN ROST: Yeah. It's fascinating to think about—when we think of the major highways that go through the Ozarks in Missouri, [Highway] 60 is one that runs, as you said, really from southern Missouri on the western side all the way over to the eastern side. And, to know that story of going in through Kentucky. But also, yeah, how [Highway] 66 comes to be as a number that just sounds—it sounds so good in some ways when they came up with, and when they say it, and now, of course, Interstate 44 has kind of taken that over and that construction.

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: Right.

SEAN ROST: But, when thinking about Cy Avery and his time as highway commissioner, that is one example of it not being easy to be highway commissioner. But, as you point out in your book, there are some other examples as well where political pressure and things like kind of get the best of him and get him out of office. So, when he leaves office as highway commissioner, how does he spend the remainder of his days—his life—along this highway that he has helped create?

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: Let me go back before while he was still highway commissioner. He was in Springfield for a gala opening of his friend, John T. Woodruff's hotel, the Kentwood Arms. While he was there, Woodruff took Avery out to where the road was being paved and they talked about it. "This is going to be a great highway for the country and it's going to be terrific

for Oklahoma and Missouri." I think it was Woodruff who suggested, "You know, we had these booster groups for the named highways. We ought to have a booster group for Route 66." So, they sat down and got in touch with towns all along the route of this highway, called a meeting, and formed the Route 66 Highway Association with two purposes. One was to get the road paved all the way across the country. And actually, that didn't really happen until 1937. And the other purpose was to make the road famous. Cy was an old promoter. He was a spellbinding speech-giver. Enthusiastic and gung-ho and tireless. He'd talked about roads most of his life and he wasn't about to quit. So, they organized the Route 66 Highway Association with 100 towns along the way—people from 100 towns along the way. Woodruff was elected the first president of the organization. The meeting went on, and then all of a sudden Cy stood up, whipped out a five dollar bill, and said, "I want to be the first member." I suspect that was not the first time that he upstaged Woodruff or anybody else. But, be that as it may, the organization was important to what we know today as Route 66. Cy stole a phrase from another one of the old named roads and called 66 the "Main Street of America." It just went from there. They promoted the highway. They put ads in national magazines. They printed maps. I have a copy of a map from the 1930s when Cy was president of the Route 66 Association. It's an interesting map because it has the names of all the towns along the way, and because cars were what they were in those days, it also has the elevation of the towns. I understand from people who know more about cars than I do that back in the early days on some of those dirt roads in the mountains you had to back-up because the cars weren't equipped to be able to go up those hills. So, it was important to know what kind of a terrain you were going to encounter as well. The Route 66 Association existed in some form or another, I think, up through the 1950s. And then, of course, in the last twenty years, there's been Historic Route 66 Association started in all these states through which Route 66 goes—California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, little tiny bit of Kansas, Illinois. And then, there's all those historic Route 66 associations and national organizations trying to keep the spirit of Route 66 alive.

SEAN ROST: Thank you very much for joining us today. It's a fascinating book. I really enjoyed, especially, the discussion you had about the origins really of the name of Route 66. I think people sometimes think that highways just get names, but there really is a history and a story behind even something [like] a highway designation and it's numbering.

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: Yeah. That was just fascinating because we had been told—like I said—when I did the first book that Cy Avery invented Route 66. To write Mrs. Lon Scott in Tulsa—she would know. So, I hunted down Mrs. Lon Scott's address and wrote her a letter, basically. I didn't know who she was, but we understand that Cy Avery invented Route 66 what can you tell us? She said to get in touch with Ruth Avery who was Cy's daughter-in-law. Mrs. Scott was the widow of the man that the Route 66 Association hired to promote Route 66. He was from Springfield. He was an Ozarker as well. But, we met Cy's daughter-in-law and she had all of his papers before the family gave them to Oklahoma State University. I remember sitting in the floor of their living room and reading through all this stuff and finding Cy's discussion of how the road was numbered. It was like, "Oh, my gosh, who knew?" Just like you said. That was the genesis, I think, for my real fascination with Cy and that whole time period because you just think roads are there—and in most of the world they are because they started with animal trails

and Indian trails [and] just eventually became the main roads. In this country, it was so new—our society was so new that we leapfrogged the technology for building roads with the technology for getting places, and they just became so incredibly important. So, I think it was an exciting time in this country—if you weren't in the buggy business.

SEAN ROST: That's true. Well, thank you very much for being with us today.

SUSAN CROCE KELLY: Sure. I hope that you can make something of all of that. I get pretty wound up when I start talking about Route 66.

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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