Our Missouri Podcast

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Guest: Kaitlyn McConnell
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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 Kaitlyn McConnell. A seventh generation Ozarker, she began writing about the Ozarks while still in high school. Starting as a columnist for the Marshfield Mail, her research and writing on topics related to Webster County led to her selection as the History Channel's Student of the Year in 2007. Later, she served as the president of the Webster County Historical Society and authored a pictorial book on the history of Marshfield. Her most recent book, "Passport to the Ozarks," was published in November 2019. Presently, Kaitlyn curates the website Ozarks Alive. Welcome to the Our Missouri Podcast, Kaitlyn.

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Thank you very much for having me.

SEAN ROST: Now, tell us a little bit about your personal, and really, family connections to the Ozarks.

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Yeah. So, I'm really fortunate on one side of my family, in particular, goes back pretty deep into the Ozarks to a couple of different places. But, specifically, the one that's closest to my heart is into Webster County where I actually grew up. I grew up in the same house that my grandmother did—my great-great-grandmother built. And so, at least seven, possibly eight generations of my family are from that area, and that's what really got me interested in Ozarks history to begin with. Back when I was in high school, I read a book called Walkin' Preacher of the Ozarks by Guy Howard, who was an itinerant preacher, and he spoke about a lot of places that were not that far away from where I lived in Webster County, and a time frame that I figured my ancestors probably could have related to a lot of the things he was
talking about. That just made things really real for me and just made me want to delve more into history and learn more about what life had been like in the past.

SEAN ROST: Now, what is it about the Ozarks overall that you find so interesting in the projects that you do and this research and writing overall?

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: I think that for me is kind of goes back to that personal connection. I've always enjoyed all history. I read about lots of different things. But, as far as actively sharing and promoting and caring about it, I think it's because of that connection, and to know that really things have evolved very rapidly in this part of the world. I look back, like I said, to my grandmother's life and think about how much different it was than mine. It's amazing to see how much different the Ozarks was even just a few generations ago. And, I think that that inspires me to really try to capture what I can right now because I see that there are people of her generation who are still around but they're disappearing pretty quickly. And so, I feel like it's almost a race against time to try and preserve those stories and traditions while they are still here.

SEAN ROST: Tell us a little bit about the origins of your well-known, larger project "Ozarks Alive." How did that come to be?

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Yeah. So, Ozarks Alive is a passion project, I guess, for me. But, it goes back a lot further than just 2015 when this actually started. It actually goes back to 2005, in a way, whenever I was a junior in high school and was given amazing opportunity that I didn't really even grasp the significance of at the time. I was allowed by the editor of the Marshfield Mail, which is the newspaper where I'm from, a chance to take over a column in the paper called Landmarks. At the time, the Landmarks column was a place that a reporter would write about historic churches in the county. They would feature a different church every week. At the time, I was kind of interested, started to be interested, in local history. I just read Walkin' Preacher of the Ozarks and thought that this would be a really cool opportunity to help learn about and share the region's history. And so, I couldn't believe it when I went into the paper one day—I told the editor I'd be willing to help with it because the person who'd been doing it before had left the paper and I thought maybe there was an opportunity to get plugged in a little bit. I was shocked when he was just like, "You take it. You can take it and do it." And, so, at seventeen, I'm like, "Oh, my gosh. Okay. Have to figure out how to do this." I just remember that first story. It was this little church called Mission Home. I went out there and did the interview and wrote the story. I had no idea at the time that that would lead to this—what I believe to be a lifelong interest and almost obsession with the area's culture and history. I did that one, and that led to the next week and the next week and eventually we expanded the column to do all historic sites in the county, which was just so much fun. I would spend every Sunday researching at the local history museum about things and then trying to go out and, in a lot of cases, just figure out where something had been. I wrote a lot about defunct schools and churches and things from the past where there wasn't necessarily a road map to get to. And so, that just instilled in me, I think, this love of the treasure hunt that I mentioned. That ultimately led to a great honor in my life. I still can't quite believe it. When I was a senior in high school, I was chosen as the History Channel Student of the Year my senior for this column work. That was—it wasn't the high point for me, really. I mean, the high point was getting to do the stories. But, it certainly was kind of a cool
point in the timeline and an acknowledgement that this type of work is important. And so, that ultimately transitioned into my time in college where I went to school to be a journalist. Kind of went on from there. I ended up moving away for a while after college. I was just really, honestly heartbroken while I was away. One of things I've always wanted to do is write about the Ozarks and I wasn't able to do that in the way I wanted to do from Norway. And so, I thought when I came back I just wanted to be able to do that. I didn't need to wait for a job or an opportunity given to me. So, I started Ozarks Alive. I didn't really have any expectations of what this would be other than I figured it would be a good excuse to be able to write and to tell people why they should tell me their stories and why I needed to be able to learn about different things. I've been very pleasantly surprised, I guess you could say, over the past few years because it really does seem like there's a hunger for these stories and this type of information. People, I think, love understanding more about where they're from and why the region is the way it is, even when there are negative things. I don't think that everything about the Ozarks is positive. That's one thing, especially, I even think about a lot. I don't want people to think that I assume everything about this area is perfect, because there are lots of things we need to fix. But, when I think that when you can talk about the good things, it gives people an appreciation that otherwise they might not have. For parts of the culture that even might be kind of laughed at sometimes. I mean, I hate when people use the term hillbilly in a derogatory nature because as I have seen in my own life and seen, especially, through research and meeting people, is that hillbillies were smart, capable, adapting people who had to make due in a world where it was not easy. And so, being able to meet their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and see how their lives have been, and share those stories, has just been very inspiring for me. I think it's something, like I said, that other people enjoy understanding and appreciating too.

SEAN ROST: Now, when you kind of look at the project overall—or, really, what you're writing there—how do you find these people and places and events that you're focusing on because, I mean, they're all very different in their own ways—how do you dig up these stories from the past?

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Well, you know, it kind of varies a little bit depending on the story. One thing I always kind of point out about Ozarks Alive, too, is while I do largely focus on things that have a historical or a cultural tie more of what I do is almost a snapshot of what life is like today. And so, it's more of a time capsule, if you will, so that in the future, in addition to people being appreciative of what is going on today, it's something that people in the future can look back on and see what life was like in 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019—you know, as time goes on. But, finding those stories is interesting. There are a lot of things I find just driving around. That's one thing I love to do on weekends. Generally try to have an interview set up somewhere, but then I just explore the region around wherever that is and try to find some stories just by wandering down backroads. It's amazing that there have been a variety of stories that I've found that way. Another way I find a lot is just through word of mouth. I try to ask people that I interview, or even just people interested in the stories I publish, "What ideas do you have from your neck of the woods?" Those are the type of stories that I want to investigate. I love writing about things that people know about. Those, of course, are good stories too. But, it's even more inspiring and interesting to me to find the stories that you're not going to find with Google [or]
you're not going to be able to find just by perusing Facebook. So, that's what I want to do is find those stories that people don't already know about very much. The third way I find a lot of stories though is simply looking through old newspapers and publications. There are things, whether it’s a specific business or person or whatever who might have been written about years ago that would be good to revisit. Or, it just inspires me to think along those same lines, or what are the parallels today. And so, that's one thing—microfilm is my friend I guess you could say because I use that very often in these stories.

SEAN ROST: Now, in looking at these stories, obviously you have to have some favorites, right? I mean, you can love all the things that you're writing, but what are some ones that really connected with you or that you thought connected well with audience?

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: You know, it's interesting to see what people respond to. I think that you can always have the category of ghosts, legends, folklore. Those things people are always really enthused to learn more about. And so, those are interesting for me because I like sharing stories people want to hear. They're also a little frustrating for me because one of the things I like the most about Ozarks Alive is the research and the puzzle-piecing things together, and with ghosts stories you can't do that quite as much as with some other ones where you can look up factual stuff in newspapers or books or whatever. But, that said, in addition to that general category, people do respond really well to history stories, you know, things about specific things that happened in the past or people in the past. Just in general, I think people have a hunger for that to kind of understand more about where they're from and who was here before them. But also, off of that, people like to learn about unique people who are around. I think that there's a couple of stories in particular that come to mind. One was about a lady who I found out about through word of mouth. She was a lady who until just a few weeks ago still ran her own restaurant at the age of ninety-one—I believe she was. She was just this great story because everybody loved her. She was well-known in the community. She would run this restaurant and did all of her own cooking and cleaning and order taking and pie baking and all of this stuff. She was interesting because she was a real person who people could identify with in a way or could identify someone they knew who she reminded them of. Someone maybe in their community or whatever. They just kind of love the novelty of it as well. So, those kind of personality profiles often are very well received. And then, like I said, history ones, in general, there's one I did a few weeks ago on the community of Carlin, which was a Czechoslovakian settlement out here a few miles north of Springfield in Polk County. That was something that a lot of people said they hadn't heard of before. It was news to them. They just really enjoyed being able to learn more about its origin and the place that it had in the greater Ozarks community.

SEAN ROST: Yeah. When I was going through Ozarks Alive, I think one of the ones that really struck me was the conversation about one-room schoolhouses and the box supper I think was something that connected well—

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Oh, yeah.

SEAN ROST: —because we have oral histories related to one-room schoolhouses and that’s always a conversation piece with the interviewee about, "Tell us about box suppers. What was
that like?" People often tell the story about how that led to relationships and friendships and really helped invest in the community and the schoolhouse overall.

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Well, and one thing I've learned—I think it's more of an evolving revelation, really, through these stories—is that I think more than anything that ties the Ozarks together is its traditions. You look out in little communities and the people change. People are born and live their lives and die. But, the thing that can make them relate to one another is the traditions, whether it is those things like pie suppers or going to the community church or shopping at the general store or knowing, even, just families for generations. Those relationships, in a way, are a form of tradition. And so, I think that that's something that has helped glue the Ozarks pieces together as time has gone on. And, exactly, you know mentioned that pie supper, that's exactly the type of thing I'm talking about, too. And even in that particular case, those events were always a little different from school to school. But, they were something that most people could understand and could bring back their own memories when they think of those.

SEAN ROST: Before we return to our conversation, here's Danielle Griego with some information about upcoming events.

DANIELLE GRIEGO: On November 19th, join jazz historian Chuck Haddix at Cook Hall in the Center for Missouri Studies for a fascinating program entitled "Early Bird: Charlie Parker’s Life and Music in Kansas City." Haddix will share new information on Parker’s time in Kansas City, giving fresh insight into his formative years as a man and musician and will feature previously unknown photos, newspaper coverage, manuscripts and recordings that illustrate the emerging genius of Charlie “Bird” Parker, one of the most influential musicians of all time.

Share your love of Missouri with items from the State Historical Society's bookstore. Whether it is an indulgence for yourself or the perfect present for that hard-to-shop-for person, the Ron & Patty Richard Bookstore at the Center for Missouri Studies offers books, art, notecards, and other gifts that highlights your state's heritage. Remember, Historical Society members receive a 10% discount on select merchandise. Plus, by shopping at the Society you help support our mission to preserve and share Missouri history. On November 16th, the Center for Missouri Studies will host a pop-up event where Peggy Jean’s Pies will be selling a variety of delicious mini tartlets. On December 7th, the bookstore will host a pop-up event where Sugarberry Blooms will be selling wreaths and evergreen bundles to deck the halls. Can't make it to our pop-ups? Don't forget the Historical Society's online bookstore at shop.shsmo.org.

SEAN ROST: Now, something that's been recently published was Ken Burns' documentary on Country Music, and for people who watched the documentary there is a rather small segment in there about a show in Springfield called Ozark Jubilee. Now, if people are like me, they were intrigued about this Missouri-based music program and why it perhaps didn't get more coverage in something like the Ken Burns documentary. One of the things I found was your writings on it, and really your thoughts and recollections about the overall Jubilee. So, could you tell us a little bit about its history in the Ozarks?

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Yeah. We'd need probably a whole podcast to devote to all the details of it because it was a really in-depth and interesting initiative. But, the top-level
information is that the Ozark Jubilee was a television show that aired from Springfield. It was filmed here in—I say filmed, it was actually broadcasted live from Springfield for several years in the 1950s primarily and into the 1960s. But, it was a huge deal at the time because it made Springfield one of the leading producers of national television in the entire country, which you of course wouldn't expect to have from here in Springfield, but that's how it was. The show itself—to me, of course, like I said, historical research is the thing I enjoy the most about these things and when I did that story about the Jubilee I just had an excuse to learn a lot about why the Jubilee happened the way that it did. It wasn't an overnight accident by any means. It actually took years of work through radio before that show even was able to become a reality. It all started years and years before with a radio station called KWTO, who really capitalized on using local talent [and] local musicians who would come in and sing what we would think of as hillbilly music. People—everyday people—became celebrities through this because they were performers and then people would recognize their names and their songs. This led to live shows that they would do where people would come and hear these people perform which ultimately transformed into the Ozark Jubilee, which was what we would think of as kind of a musical variety show that actually a lot of very big name stars were on at different times. You had Patsy Cline. Breda Lee was a person who was here as a kid. Gene Autry. Just lots of different people who were famous [and] who really when it was during its heyday made Springfield kind of a competitor to Nashville as far as country music. There were so many stars that were coming through Springfield at that time. It's just an amazing piece of history, really. It was fairly short-lived in the great scheme of things, but people here in Springfield who lived here during that time are very familiar with it. It was, I would say, a very defining part of Springfield's history when it was around.

SEAN ROST: That's very interesting to think about. Remind me if I'm incorrect, but you had actually talked to some people who had been affiliated with the show as well when you were writing the [article].

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Yeah. You had a—people—I mean, even, I think I did that story back in 2016-2017 maybe, and unfortunately that generation is kind of disappearing as well because if you think about you had to be old enough to be on the show in the 50s, which, there were children who were on it. So, you had some younger people, but most of them would have been older teenagers [or] twenties, thirties, forties, etc. And so, you have fewer people around to talk about it firsthand. But, yeah, there were several people who could remember singing on it [and] who had been on the shows. One person I talked to had been behind the scenes with camera work, I believe, and just talked about how it was this great initiative. It was something new. It was kind of a new frontier. Nobody had worked in TV before. And so, this was a thing that was a learning curve for everybody, I think. Just figuring out how it all worked together. When the show started, they couldn't even film it in Springfield because—now, I'm not an engineer so I can't explain this exactly—the signal—it could come in to Springfield but couldn't go out. And so, until they could get everything ready for it to work properly, they actually had to go to Columbia and do the shows from there for several weeks until things were ready to go here in town. But, it was a new time for everyone. I'm sure a very exciting thing to feel that they were a part of.
SEAN ROST: I'm remembering now, the bus trip that you mentioned. Yeah. The bus trip between Springfield and Columbia and then back in a day.

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Yeah.

SEAN ROST: I can't even imagine.

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Yeah. I'm sure it was pretty intense for a while.

SEAN ROST: Shirting gears a little bit, tell us about your most recent book project, *Passport to the Ozarks*.

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Yeah. So, Ozarks Alive has been around for about four-and-a-half years now, approximately, and it's evolved a little bit over time initially. It still does really focus on articles. But, it has gone expanded beyond that in recent months, especially. One of the projects I'm working on now is this book called *Passport to the Ozarks*. It's set to come out in just a few weeks, which will be early November at this point. It's a collection of sixty-one different places to visit throughout the Ozarks region. The majority of them in this case are in Missouri. There are a couple from Arkansas, but I've largely focused on Missouri in this. It's a little bit of everything. You've got restaurants you can go eat. You have historical sites of significance. Just quirky stores in different places out in the backcountry that hopefully would be of interest to people who like to get out and about and have a daytrip different places. There are photos in it. It's got short articles about each one. So, it's just kind of a unique collection of different places that I believe people would really enjoy visiting.

SEAN ROST: Now, obviously, we want people to read the book and check everything out. But, for someone who might be wanting to get off I-44 and get off the beaten path, what's some place that you'd recommend that they check out?

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Oh, geez, there's so many. Let me see. One place that I always love and encourage people to visit that's in there is this place called Topaz Mill, which is down in Douglas County. Topaz Mill is kind of like a step back in time almost. It's a privately owned mill. It's not opened specific hours. It's a family that owns it. But, they let people come visit it. The unique part about Topaz Mill is that it's basically locked—it was locked up after the mill closed and all the equipment and different things that are still in it that were in it when the mill was operational. So, you can go in there and see the bins and grinders and machinery and even signage on the walls of what it looked like back then. I'm just so impressed and touched, really, by this family that they're so enthused about sharing this that they're willing to let visitors come and check it out. I believe it's for free. Just come and experience what this was like in the past. In addition to the mill, they actually still have the old store from when Topaz was a community as well. So, you can kind of see both those things when you're down there. That's just one example. I have a variety of different places, too. There's some old stores. Another place closer to Springfield is called Turner Station Mercantile. It's known as Greene County's oldest grocery store. It's been operated—the store has been owned by the same family for six generations since the 1800s. And so, places of those type of flavors is kind of what is filling the books pages.
SEAN ROST: Interesting. Now, that book is coming out in early November like you said. What are some other current projects you're working on with Ozarks Alive or even other book projects in the future?

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: You know, it's interesting, with the stories—after I find a topic about something I don't wait too long to jump in. So, with the stories, those kind of evolve pretty quickly. But, with larger things, I actually—you mentioned the pie suppers—that's one thing I'm jumping into is I'm hosting an old fashioned pie supper. Part of my effort with this was to host an event that maybe people had heard about from the past from the Ozarks, but hadn't had a chance to experience firsthand. So, we're going to have it at an old restored schoolhouse. Try to make it as authentic as possible. Encouraging people to bring pies. We have an auctioneer who's going to auction them off. It's just going to be a lot of fun. So, those type of things. Helping people connect with the past in different ways is kind of my focus with something like that. I also do a variety of presentations throughout the area. I'm looking for other opportunities [or] ways that we need to preserve history that might not be being done right now. It's a very long-term project, but another thing is I have kind of an old-time Ozarks music documentary that's in progress. I'm gradually doing interviews for and there's no set timeline on when that will be done. It's just fitting in when I can get volunteer help to do the interviews. But, those are the type of things. Like I said in the beginning, just trying to capture and share things while we have the opportunity. I think, ultimately, that's my goal with Ozarks Alive. It's just a lot a fun. I really enjoy it.

SEAN ROST: Well, thank you very much for joining us today.

KAITLYN MCCONNELL: Well, thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

SEAN ROST: 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.

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.