

Our Missouri Podcast

Title: Episode 23: Ozark National Scenic Riverways

Guest: Dena Matteson

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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 Dena Matteson. She is the Chief of Interpretation, Planning, and Partnerships for the National Park Service at the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. Welcome to the *Our Missouri Podcast*, Dena.

DENA MATTESON: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

SEAN ROST: Now, this season we opened up with a focus on the Ozarks, and I'd like to really start by talking about really the pre-history of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. We know it kind of in the last fifty years as being this National Park Service project and, really, park to preserve these riverways. But, how did early settlers, indigenous people, descendants of people living in the area—their ancestors—utilize these rivers since rivers are so important really when we think of Missouri history?

DENA MATTESON: Yes, the rivers here have been attractive to many inhabitants over thousands of years. We have evidence of prehistoric tribal presence 10,000 years ago and even beyond—all the way up through the more recent history of our early Native Americans and our European settlers. But, this area of the Ozarks is attractive, and has been attractive, to all of those settlers for a variety of reasons. Some of the biggest are our natural springs here that produce so much water and feed the rivers in this area and provide an area where they could hunt and settle and exist on a subsistence lifestyle with little interaction with outside community centers or populations.

SEAN ROST: Now, we think about as we get into the 20th Century there is an effort—there's a larger conservation movement. There's the early establishment of national parks. But, it's not really until the 1960s and into the 1970s that there is this push for the protection of these riverways at kind of a federal level. But, how did Missourians, and people, even, you could say outside of the state, try to preserve and protect these rivers and the waterways that encompass what is today the Scenic Riverways?

DENA MATTESON: Well, it really came down to folks who recognized the value of not only the clear spring-fed free-flowing riverways, but also the value of this large area where we had these high volume springs, the karst topography, caves, and many other resources in the area that were attractive for recreation and vacations and enjoying a lot of things that people couldn't enjoy in some of the urban areas not that far away. One of the key factors in trying to preserve the rivers and get them under federal protection is the movement in the early half of the 20th Century where many riverways across the country were being dammed in order to provide power and electricity as the rise of electrifying the country came about. The rivers had begun to be enjoyed quite heavily as a recreational destination for visitors from Kansas City and Saint Louis and other areas as highways became more established and brought people into the heart of the Ozarks to visit places like the state parks that had been developed along the Current and Jack's Fork River. People began to recognize the value of these areas, and as the plan to dam up the rivers and put all of these resources far under water in a lake or reservoir, those plans were not met with a lot of support from our local area who were using the Ozarks as a way to escape from the everyday urban life and work [and] to get back to nature and back to enjoying resources. So, it really was an effort over a number of years, from the 30s to the early 1960s with conservationists and congressmen, local residents, residents from those urban areas who joined together—and not without controversy because there were lots of different options suggested for how to best preserve the rivers and keep them from being dammed. But, through all those efforts over a number of years, we were finally able to come to a compromise that established Ozark National Scenic Riverways in 1964.

SEAN ROST: Yeah. We have oral histories in our collection here at the [State] Historical Society [of Missouri] that really tell the tale of how big of an issue it was to create this riverways system, and certainly the controversy and kind of the back forth both pros and cons. So, when we think of the National Park Service, we often think of these large national parks in the western United States. We can think of Yellowstone. We can think of Yosemite. Places like that. But, what makes something like the Ozark National Scenic Riverways unique compared to its fellow parks, and we could even think of national monuments and national historic places?

DENA MATTESON: Well, one of the things that makes Ozark National Scenic Riverways extremely unique is that it is in fact the country's first federally protected river system. The establishment of this park predated the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, and it actually was considered a prototype for that Act that would later save and protect a number of rivers and riverways throughout the country. So, that really is one of the most unique aspects of the establishment of Ozark National Scenic Riverways is that pioneering effort to preserve some of these phenomenal river systems throughout the country. In addition, with that, our establishment

of these rivers and the park that protects them, Ozark Riverways protects over 300 caves, 400 springs, a number of cultural resources, and, as part of our enabling legislation to protect and preserve for the future all of these various cultural and natural resources, we are tasked with interpreting them for our visitors. That's a mandate in our parks enabling legislation that is somewhat different than many other national parks. Not a lot of folks realize that interpretation, from our perspective, means to relate these resources and their importance to our visitors and to all of the citizens of the United States so that we can all enjoy and understand what is unique and special here. So, for us to be working with that as part of our enabling legislation is kind of a unique marching order for us.

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

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. The Missouri Conference on History is dedicated to bringing together teachers and students of history to share research results, exchange information on teaching and curriculum, and to promote the value of the discipline. You can help the Missouri Conference on History grow and share your message with over 150 people as an exhibitor, by becoming a sponsor, and by purchasing an advertisement in the program. 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.

National History Day in Missouri is looking for educators, historians, writers, filmmakers, museum staff, and community members to join them at this year's state contest to judge student projects. The state contest will be held on April 25, 2020 at the University of Missouri-Columbia. To thank you for your essential participation in National History Day, the State Historical Society of Missouri will provide a light breakfast and lunch, plus a travel stipend of up to \$50 for judges whose round-trip mileage exceeds 75 miles. National History Day in Missouri is a unique opportunity for middle and high school age students to explore the past in a creative, hands-on way by producing a documentary, exhibit, paper, performance, or website on a topic of their choosing. To learn more about National History Day in Missouri, including judge orientation and how to start a program at your own school, please visit shsmo.org/nhdmo/. During the month of December, the State Historical Society of Missouri has teamed up with CoMo Gives for an end of the year campaign to support National History Day students. If you are interested in helping Missouri students shine, please visit the CoMo Gives website at comogives.com and search for the State Historical Society of Missouri.

SEAN ROST: Now, when we think of, obviously the riverways, the rivers themselves. As you mentioned the Current and the Jack's Fork rivers. But, there are historic sites as well. What are some of these places that are within the riverways system that are historically preserved?

DENA MATTESON: Oh, there are so many unique cultural sites along the riverways, but a number of areas actually have structures that still exist and that we still actively protect. Probably

the most recognized would be Alley Mill which sits at the edge of Alley Spring outside of Eminence, Missouri. That spring and mill are some of the heaviest visited areas in the park. Not only do we receive a lot of visitation there, but we were also recognized in 2017 by having Alley Mill featured on one of the America the Beautiful quarters. So, that's an area that we are proud to actively preserve and also be able to invite our visitors inside to learn some of the history and culture at that site. In addition to Alley [Mill], we have places like the Big Spring Lodge and Cabins, which is an incredible collection of facilities and structures from the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration time periods in the 1930s and 40s when those work programs had camps established in the state parks and built a number of structures, not just at Big Spring but also at Alley Spring, Round Spring, and other areas. But, currently, the Big Spring Lodge and Cabins are closed pending a major restoration project. Those are an end result that we are anticipating with much excitement. Project work should begin within the next year to actually begin that restoration project so that these buildings that area eighty-plus years old can get the revitalization and the stabilization they need to continue to be enjoyed for many, many years. Alley Mill and Big Spring Lodge and Cabins are two of our larger and most recognizable historic sites, but we have a number of other smaller areas that people might not even realize are protected as part of Ozark National Scenic Rivers. Places like several old historic cabins along the river, like the Suzie Nichols Cabin and the Upper Current, or the Howell-Maggard Cabin near Akers Ferry. Klepzig Mill is a smaller mill than Alley Mill, but it is very representative of the types of small community-based mills that would have operated throughout the area. We've got a couple of historic houses, like the Chilton House near Owls Bend, the Lesh House in the same area, as well as some schools. The Buttin Rock School, Akers School, the Storys Creek School located at Alley Mill. So, a number of historic structures that we do try to continue to do some regular maintenance and preservation on that visitors can come and enjoy and learn about some of the history of the past.

SEAN ROST: Could you tell us a little bit about the history of Alley Mill? I'm kind of interested and intrigued by that story.

DENA MATTESON: Alley Mill is a large mill located at Alley Spring. The current mill that sits at that site was constructed in about 1894. Now, prior to that mill, there had been some smaller mills at that site starting as early as the late 1860s, I believe. The current mill structure was completed in 1894 and 1895. When it had been constructed, the owners at the time had actually anticipated that development of railroad lines was going to bring a railroad line right into the Alley community area, and therefore would provide them with an opportunity for a more commercial mill. That's why Alley Mill is not really typical of some of the small community-based grist mills that would be common around the area. It had a much larger structure. It had much more advanced milling equipment in the fact that it used steel rollers inside of its machines and had a number of levels [and] floors where there was different milling sifting and bolting equipment to eventually grind and separate the wheat into fancy flour or white flour versus just a stone ground whole wheat, which is what most of the typical grist mills would produce. So, when that mill was constructed with the hope that it would be more of a commercial venture, they put a lot of effort and money into making it with the latest technology of the time. Now, that didn't end up working out for the owners because the railroad line didn't come all the way into

Alley in a way to bring grain from outer areas. It ended up really just serving that local community, and they soon added equipment for milling and processing corn, which was actually a more commonly grown grain source here in the area. The mill regularly changed ownership every few years. It changed ownership, and then in the 1920s it was taken over by the Missouri State Parks as part of the Alley Spring State Park.

SEAN ROST: Fascinating. I think that's really interesting to know what all exists within this large, encompassing area of the Riverways. How many counties are featured in the Riverways?

DENA MATTESON: There are four counties. The land and river base of Ozark National Scenic Riverways actually crosses four counties in this area.

SEAN ROST: Now, obviously, when we look outside, the leaves are off the trees. It's not terribly cold yet, but it has been snowing from time to time. Winter is setting in. When we think of the Riverways, we often think of that summer, kind of canoeing and enjoying the outdoors, but that doesn't mean that people can't go to the Riverways in wintertime. What can people do to visit the area during the winter months?

DENA MATTESON: You know winter is actually overlooked by many as a time to enjoy the rivers and the land around the rivers, but it is also one of my favorite times here because you can get out and you can enjoy. With the leaves off the trees, you can really enjoy the beauty [and] the scenery. There's the opportunity to see eagles along the river. There's still a lot of recreational opportunity as well. We have paddlers who float year-round. If you're equipped with the right equipment, you can enjoy paddling almost any day of the year. A lot of people get out on the rivers in motorized boats, either with the digging season that runs from September through January, and is a popular activity here along the Riverways. Fishing is still very popular in the winter. And then, things that you can do around the river—still enjoy a view of the water—like hiking or horseback riding those activities are really much more enjoyable in the shoulder seasons of the late fall and early spring and throughout the winter when you deal with a lot fewer outside pests and you have an opportunity to have a better view of some of the rivers from different bluffs or overlook areas that you might not have an opportunity to enjoy with full vegetation in the summer.

SEAN ROST: Now, of course, when the weather does increase and it becomes warmer outside, obviously, the visitors to the Riverways increase as well. So, what are some things that are coming—we could say in the spring or the summer—that people could look forward to in visiting the Riverways?

DENA MATTESON: Well, obviously, the number one draw for visitors who come in the summer and in the late spring and early fall are getting on the water. They want to come to the river. They want to be able to actually get their feet in the water and enjoy some sort of activity, whether it be swimming at a swimming hole or a gravel bar, or floating, or the motorized boats again. We have so many visitors who come and camp, not only within the park but in the communities surrounding the park, and then spend part of their time here kayaking, canoeing, floating, or rafting, and enjoying different stretches of the river. You can actually float or spend

time on the river several days and see different things every single day by the time you've chosen to travel different sections of our 134 miles of riverways.

SEAN ROST: Interesting. Finally, as someone who is obviously at the Riverways on a regular basis, someone who is familiar with the area, what is part of that park system that you would recommend to visitors? Maybe something a little bit off the beaten path. Something maybe not as popular of a location that people would think about.

DENA MATTESON: Well, I have a couple I would recommend. First, I would say that you'll find something, honestly something hidden and unique along nearly every mile of the river if you get out and do a little bit of exploring. There are neat cultural sites. There are incredible natural sites and resources nearby that you can see in all areas. But, for me personally, there are a couple of areas that I think visitors aren't readily aware of that if you get a few minutes I think are well worth the trip and well worth even the rough roads to get there. Klepzig Mill, which is located near Rocky Falls to the east of Eminence, Missouri, is one of my personal favorites. It is incredibly picturesque setting right on the edge of Rocky Creek. You get to envision what a small local mill with a family community would have been like, and those beautiful rhyolite boulders and rocks that frame the creek as it passes through are just really something to sit and enjoy. Secondly, I'd recommend a place like Welch Hospital. There's some unique history there. Those are the ruins of an old hospital that was once going to be a place for folks with respiratory illnesses, and that is on the Upper Current River north of Akers. You can actually park nearby and hike a short path—about a third of a mile—down to the edge of one of our phenomenal large springs—Welch Spring—and see those hospital ruins and learn a little bit about that. It is just an incredible setting right there on the edge of the Current River, and it's a really popular attraction. If you're floating in the summer, you come across it, but if you're not going to float that section of the river, you might not even realize that we have something like that that you could easily drive to and take a short walk and enjoy.

SEAN ROST: Well, thank you very much for joining us today. I really enjoyed our conversation.

DENA MATTESON: You're welcome. I certainly appreciate the chance to share just a little bit of what we have to offer here.

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.