

## *Our Missouri Podcast*

Title: Summer Series 2020: Voda Curtis: Suffrage & Civil Rights

Guest: Keely Doll

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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.

One hundred years ago this summer, Missourians awaited news regarding the ratification of the 19th Amendment. The state had approved the amendment, which prohibited the federal government and states from denying a citizen the right to vote based upon sex, a year prior, in 1919. However, it would take another year before Tennessee became the 36th and final state needed to ratify the new constitutional amendment in August 1920. As we consider the centennial of women's suffrage, the Our Missouri Podcast invites listeners to join us as we explore the fight for the right to vote through the eyes of a group of "Show-Me Suffragists" who are not well-known in Missouri History. In this episode, we turn our attention to southwest Missouri and the life of Voda Curtis. Her story is quite interesting in that she actively fought not only for the right to vote, but also for equal rights for all Americans.

This episode is also special because it will be narrated by Keely Doll, an oral history intern for the State Historical Society of Missouri. Keely—along with Cydney Smith and Cassie Draudt—researched Voda Curtis' life during their respective internships in order to develop a better understanding of the close ties between civil rights and suffrage. So, without further ado, I will let Keely tell us about the life and legacy of Voda Curtis.

KEELY DOLL: Voda Curtis' family has a rich history. From her grandparents buying their freedom from slavery and moving across the South into Missouri, to her own challenges as a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the League of Women Voters to ensure every American not only voting rights, but also civil rights. And yet, little is known about the life of Voda Curtis, outside of scant records held in various archives and

an oral history recording she did with Drury College's Ruth Bamberger in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Though her life spanned nearly the entirety of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Voda's story really begins in the pre-Civil War South.

Her maternal grandparents, William and Narcissa Gatewood, were enslaved. William had been sold into slavery in Kentucky to William McElroy, a local banker, to settle a debt. Despite being enslaved, William had previously been taught to read and write, giving him an advantage on the plantation and helping him move to a position of authority amongst other enslaved people. He was described as energetic and a hard worker, often spending his nights fishing or making shoes that he could sell to earn his own money with William McElroy's permission. Eventually, after saving over five hundred dollars, he was able to buy his and his wife's freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Narcissa was sold into slavery at age five, and traveled with her owner from Alabama to Arkansas. According to family history, Narcissa traveled to Arkansas by holding on to the suspenders of her owner as he rode on horseback. She was also considered so beautiful that Mrs. McElroy refused to allow her to work outside of the home. As Voda recounted years later, "Mrs. McElroy was so impressed that she said, 'Well, she will never do any hard work. I'm going to take her as my maid.' And everywhere Mrs. McElroy went, my grandmother went with her, to church, to entertain, to anything that Mrs. McElroy went to, she always took my grandmother. And when she married my grandfather, they married in Mrs. McElroy's parlor."<sup>3</sup>

After a Union victory near Fayetteville, Arkansas, General John B. Sanburn informed enslaved people who reached his camp that they could follow his troops into neighboring Missouri and be ensured safe travel along the way. Information was also relayed that there was land available in Minnesota, if they continued north. According to Voda, her maternal grandparents considered the offer to settle in Minnesota, but were concerned about the colder climate and chose to stop in Missouri. Years later, Sanburn visited the Gatewoods in Missouri, and told them of the development of the land that they passed on—it now housed a railroad depot. Instead, the Gatewoods moved to Springfield, Missouri, and operated a fruit orchard that employed roughly thirty workers. Later, the family settled on a 160-acre farm in neighboring Webster County. Voda recalled spending a great deal of time with her grandparents as a young girl, particularly late nights listening to stories from her grandmother. "My mother used to have to make me go to bed at night because my grandmother told me—oh, she would sit down and she'd just talk to me hour after hour, and as soon as she'd get through one story, I'd say tell me another one, grandma."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis.

<sup>2</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 12 December 1978, 1 October 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 12 December 1978, 1 October 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 12 December 1978, 1 October 1979.

While her maternal grandparents resided in Greene and Webster counties, Voda's paternal grandparents spent time in Joplin before eventually moving to Springfield. Originally born in Alabama, Tillman Hardy, her paternal grandfather, had lived briefly in Kansas before taking a job in a lead mine near Joplin, Missouri. Her grandmother Mary watched over the children and became a cook for wealthy local families. Voda remembered them as very energetic as well as devout Christians. "Never missed church. They would cook on Saturday so they wouldn't have to cook on Sunday, and they would attend morning service, afternoon service, and evening service. They enjoyed that very much."<sup>5</sup>

Voda's parents, Taylor Hardy and Cora Gatewood, met through a mutual friend while he worked as a barber and she taught school in Joplin. They were married in the early 1890s and Beatrice Voda Hardy was born in 1893 at the Gatewood farm near Northview in Webster County. The Hardys lived briefly in Joplin before moving to Oklahoma. When Voda was about to enter school, she was sent back to Missouri to live with her grandparents. A few years later, the family was reunited in Springfield where Voda attended Lincoln High School, while her father operated a barbershop and her mother kept house and sold produce at the city market.<sup>6</sup>

Though she grew up in a segregated city, Voda spoke little about any discrimination directed at her or her family. Nevertheless, episodes of racial violence, particularly lynchings, were always fresh in her mind. In April 1906, Horace Duncan, Fred Coker, and Will Allen were lynched by a mob of roughly 3,000 people in Springfield. A day prior to the lynching, a white woman claimed she had been assaulted by two African American men. Duncan and Coker were arrested by police soon after, though little evidence tied them to the alleged crime and their employer provided an alibi regarding their location when the attack occurred. While Duncan and Coker waited in jail, a mob formed outside and met little resistance from law enforcement when it stormed the facility and dragged both men to the city square. The mob hanged both men from Gottfried Tower in the square and later burned their bodies. Still out for blood, the mob returned to the jail and lynched fellow inmate Will Allen. The National Guard arrived later that night and dispersed the crowd. Over the next few days, the woman who initially reported the attack claimed that neither Duncan nor Coker were involved. By that point, though, three men were dead and the city's African American community feared for its collective life.<sup>7</sup>

In her later recollection of the lynchings, Voda remembered that her father left work early that day after hearing rumors of a mob. While driving home, all the street lights were off, and she recalled, "And so, my mother said, 'well it looks like the whole town is against the Negroes,'"

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<sup>5</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 12 December 1978, 1 October 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 12 December 1978, 1 October 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 1 October 1979; *Springfield News-Leader*, 28 December 1980. For detailed accounts of the lynchings see Kimberly Harper, *White Man's Heaven: The Lynching and Expulsion of Blacks in the Southern Ozarks, 1894-1909* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010) and Harriet C. Frazier, *Lynchings in Missouri, 1803-1981* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2009).

because they thought they turned them out so they couldn't be identified." The next morning, Voda's church filled with parishioners who offered testimonials and prayers over the events of the previous days. Later that night, several of Springfield's African American families rode out to the Gatewood's farm seeking shelter for the night against a rumored attack on the city's Black neighborhoods. The attack did not occur, though there was evidence that local miners prevented some potential mob members from accessing a store of dynamite. Nevertheless, the lynching and its aftermath led to a sizable exodus of African American residents from Greene County.<sup>8</sup>

The Hardys opted to stay in Springfield, and Voda graduated from Lincoln High School in 1910. She attended Walden University in Nashville for two years before enrolling at the prestigious Howard University. Though she initially sought a degree in education, Voda's time at Howard rekindled her fascination with political science—which originated with local political rallies she attended with her father in Greene County. Her time in Washington D.C. had such an impact on her life, that Voda later advised, "I think every citizen of the United States should at least spend one year in Washington."<sup>9</sup>

The political hustle and bustle of the nation's capitol also inspired Voda's views on key issues of the Progressive Era. As her and her classmates became more involved in their studies, they began to consider the fact that they could not participate in their own political system as voters. They also wondered why certain jobs weren't open to women, and why when they did join the workforce they made less money than men. Perhaps not surprisingly, when the time came, Voda and her Howard classmates eagerly joined the Woman Suffrage Procession in 1913. Held in March, the Procession featured more than 5,000 women—including Alice Paul and Helen Keller—marching on behalf of suffrage just a day before the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson. As part of the Howard University contingent, Voda donned her cap and gown and marched down Pennsylvania Avenue before the largest crowd she had ever seen. "Of course, the President was sitting out—he reviewed us. The different diplomats along the way, some of them would wave at us. We just felt wonderful. I never felt like that in my life before. Some of the people would jeer at us and say, 'Look who wants to vote! Ya, ya, ya, ya!' But, we didn't blink an eye, we just kept our heads going, no one said a word. We marched on down there in perfect rhythm."<sup>10</sup>

The battle for suffrage did not end in 1913, and Voda returned to Springfield after her graduation from Howard. She prayed for change, but she also realized that she had to be an active participant in that change. Not long after being back in Springfield, she joined the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Founded in 1909, the NAACP established branches across the country in an effort to challenge segregation and

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<sup>8</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis. *Springfield Daily News*, 1 October 1979; *Springfield News-Leader*, 28 December 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 12 December 1978, 1 October 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 13 June 1977, 12 December 1978, 1 October 1979; *Springfield Leader-Press*, 13 June 1977.

discrimination against all people of color. The Springfield chapter was established in 1918, and quickly got to work addressing local issues connected to segregation, voting rights, and racial violence. Two of the earliest leaders of the Springfield NAACP were Dr. James B. Clark and his wife, Pearl, who operated a medical clinic and pharmacy that was "a vital hub of activity for the black community." The Clarks also served as key conduits of information between the local NAACP branch and national headquarters in New York.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to her activism within the NAACP, Voda also worked with a group of local women organized by Mrs. McKay Miller to bring attention and interest to the issue of suffrage. They went from house to house in Springfield and neighboring communities passing out pamphlets and speaking to residents about voting rights. Voda cast her first vote in November 1920 in an experience she later described as, "the greatest honor I could ever hope to attain, because I felt I was part of the government." She also noted that despite racial issues within the community of Springfield, she never felt that her right to vote was denied due to disenfranchisement tactics.<sup>12</sup>

While advocating on behalf of civil rights and suffrage, Voda taught briefly at Cave Springs before accepting a position at Springfield's Lincoln High School. Due to requirements that female teachers resign their jobs if they had children, she did not return to teaching until her daughter was ten at the end of the 1920s. She taught in nearby Mount Vernon for two years before receiving a job offer as a supervisor at the Recorder of Deeds office in Washington D.C. She worked there for a little over five years, splitting her time between the nation's capital and Springfield, where her family, including her husband, Earnest, and daughter, Venona, still resided. At the start of World War II, she returned to southwest Missouri and stayed there for the remainder of her life.<sup>13</sup>

Once back in Springfield, Voda returned her attention to civic affairs, particularly through the League of Women Voters. While there has been some confusion about when she officially joined the group, most members during her life noted her appearance at early organizational meetings around 1952. Even after reaching her eightieth birthday, fellow League of Women Voters' members remarked that Voda, "actively attends...meetings and takes her turn on resource study committees and as hostess." After her husband passed away in 1976, she continued to serve in the League of Women Voters and NAACP, as well as local clubs, including

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<sup>11</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Missouri Republican*, 4 January 1919; *Springfield News-Leader*, 17 July 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 13 June 1977; *Springfield Leader-Press*, 13 June 1977.

<sup>13</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 12 December 1978, 1 October 1979.

the American Legion auxiliary, the American Association of Retired Persons, and the Saint Agnes Council of Catholic Women.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of her life, the civil rights activist and suffragist was still quite vocal on the important issues of the day. While she felt that education and study was needed in regards to the Equal Rights Amendment, she also noted that it was time that such legislation became law. "I think women have been pushed back far enough, don't you think so? I think it's time for them to stand up and speak out for the things that they know that they deserve. That's the way I feel about it. I guess I'm a radical. I don't know. I don't mean to be."<sup>15</sup>

Voda "Bea" Hardy Curtis passed away on March 1, 1990. Her funeral took place at Saint Agnes Cathedral in Springfield, the church she had been affiliated with since the 1920s. She was buried alongside her husband in Saint Mary's Cemetery. "That's right, a long way to go. I hope we make it. It may not happen during my lifetime, but maybe something will happen."<sup>16</sup>

SEAN ROST: Now that we know a little more about the life of Voda Curtis, I want to invite Cydney Smith, Cassie Draudt, and Keely Doll to talk about their thoughts regarding their research into Voda Curtis' life. Let's begin with Cydney.

CYDNEY SMITH: The one thing that I found the most interesting was how much she focused on the history of her family. So, you got to hear a lot about her grandparents and her great-grandparents and how she came to be in Missouri, which, I thought that was interesting. And then, I also really enjoyed how she acted so nonchalant about her works in the suffrage movement. Like, she focused more so, again, on her family versus the actual—I want to say—actions that she did that pertained to the movement. When the audio log did talk to her about that, she kind of made it sound like, "Why wouldn't I be a part of that? It's a no-brainer." And, just to have that courage, especially being a woman of color and also just being a woman during that time to have the courage to do so. I think it says a lot too about what's going on right now with the Black Lives Matter movement.

CASSIE DRAUDT: I guess in researching Voda Curtis, she's one of the names where it's like maybe she's not a national name or celebrity or anything, but when you're looking at her actions and her life and her family history it's kind of amazing how you can see just one person with so much going against them being a woman and a person of color in the early 1900s when all of this is going on, and still managing to make so much of an impact in breaking all of the barriers that she came across and getting involved in politics and really fighting for women's rights to vote. It's just—it kind of gives you inspiration to think, if she was able to do this with all of that going

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<sup>14</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield News-Leader*, 6 September 1976; *Springfield Daily News*, 12 December 1978; *Springfield News-Leader*, 28 February 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield Daily News*, 13 June 1977; *Springfield Leader-Press*, 13 June 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Curtis, Voda B.; Box 13; T-569; *Oral History Collection* (S0829); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis; *Springfield News-Leader*, 28 February 1990.

against her and make a difference, what can I do? How can I help? Because I think at the end of the day that was the question that she was really asking herself, "What can I do? How can I help? How can I put others before myself and contribute to the common good?"

KEELY DOLL: Working with Voda Curtis' interview was really interesting, especially on a personal level as a young woman of voting age. Her involvement with women's suffrage groups was really inspiring, as well as the fact that she worked in the political sphere during a time when many women didn't work at all. She stayed devoted to the political organizations, even when she moved back to Springfield, balancing being a mother, wife, and an activist. Her joy at voting for the first time in 1920 really brings to light how important and hard fought a woman's right to participate in American politics was and still is.

SEAN ROST: My thanks to Cydney Smith, Cassie Draudt, and Keely Doll for their thoughts there on Voda Curtis. Thanks to all our guests who joined us here during the summer series on Show-Me Suffragists: Elyssa Ford, Ethan Colbert, and Janet Olson. Also, a big thank you to A.J. Medlock and the past and present staff of the Saint Louis Research Center of the State Historical Society of Missouri for preserving and digitizing Voda Curtis' oral history. Please join us in September 2020 for the start of Season 3 of the *Our Missouri Podcast*.

KEVIN WALSH: Thank you for listening to the *Our Missouri Podcast*. If you would like to learn more about the podcast, including past and future episodes, information about guests, and upcoming events, please visit our website at [shsmo.org/our-missouri](http://shsmo.org/our-missouri).