

## “WPA Guide” shows Missouri before interstates

By Timothy J. Fox

I have traveled across Missouri—from Kansas City to Columbia to St. Louis and back, or the reverse—maybe 50 times. I once thought I knew this part of the state very well; however, far north and south of my narrow route, a world of variety, complexity and history exists. I learned of this other world by reading “Missouri: The WPA Guide to the ‘Show Me’ State,” a book that was reissued this spring by the Missouri Historical Society Press in St. Louis.

Originally published in 1941 under the title “Missouri: A Guide to the ‘Show Me’ State,” the book is part of the American Guide Series, a group of state guidebooks produced in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Writers’ Project.

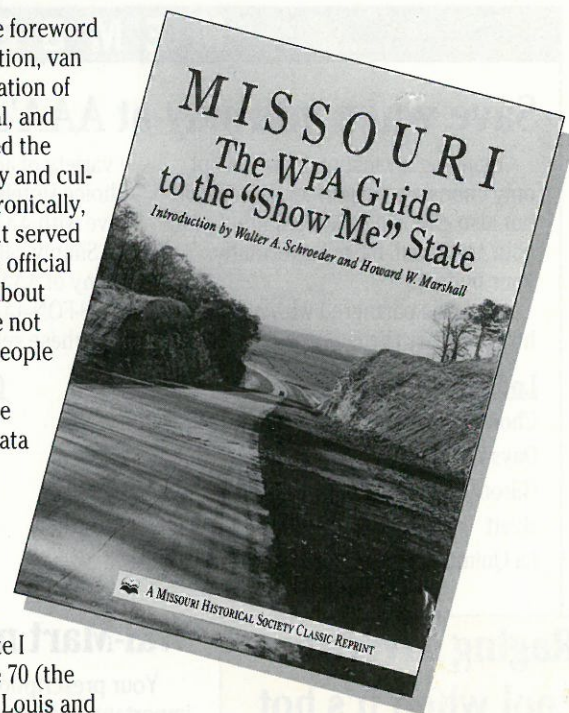
A young scholar and future Missouri Historical Society director, Charles van Ravenswaay, headed the Missouri Writers’ Project, a small group of men and women who traveled the state seeking out all aspects of Missouri culture, from art to newspapers to transportation. Along the way, they wrote about the cities and towns they passed through—from the well known (Columbia, Joplin, Springfield) to the not so well known (Canton, Hollister, Rich Hill)—and arranged their journeys into 17 tours and 11 in-depth examinations of “principal cities.”

The time that produced “The WPA Guide” was one of rapid and dramatic

change, much like our own. In the foreword to the book’s 1986 paperback edition, van Ravenswaay detailed the combination of joblessness, agricultural upheaval, and technological change that inspired the guide’s writers to record a history and culture that was fast disappearing. Ironically, the Missouri Highway Department served as the Missouri Writers’ Project’s official sponsor. As the department set about building roads that would change not only the landscape but the way people think about the landscape, van Ravenswaay and his staff used the state’s new highways to collect data on the people and places those roads would forever alter.

The writers succeeded. “The WPA Guide” gives Missourians a knowledge of their state that cuts across history, folklore, and geography. For example, the route I thought I knew so well—Interstate 70 (the old U.S. Highway 40) between St. Louis and Kansas City—emerges with a story much deeper than any that convenience stores, exit ramps, and mile markers could hope to convey.

“The highway follows in general the old route of the Boon’s Lick Trail which led westward from St. Louis to Franklin in the Boon’s Lick Country,” the book’s authors write. “The procession along the pioneer trail was colorful. Sturdy high-wheeled covered wagons, often brightly painted, bore the loads of furniture, china, and glassware



**St. Joseph, Mo., is depicted in an 1853 engraving by Herman Meyer (below left). The image is also seen in “The WPA Guide” (cover seen above)/Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis photos**



for the new homes. On the wagon sides hung the axe, skillets, and kettles. On the seat at the front, or perhaps in the rear, rode the women and children. . . . Not all rode; many thousands patiently trudged Westward with their worldly goods in a pack.”

“Missouri: The WPA Guide to the ‘Show Me’ State” conjures up such images countless in its nearly 700 pages, images that will stick in my mind no matter where I travel next—hopefully far beyond the interstate.

The book, which comes with a 1998 highway map provided by the Missouri Department of Transportation, is available by mail to AAA members for \$24.95. To obtain a copy, mail your check (made payable to “AAA”) to: “The Midwest Motorist,” “WPA Guide,” 12901 N. Forty Drive, St. Louis, MO 63141. ■

*Timothy J. Fox is editor of “Where We Live: A Guide to St. Louis Communities.”*