

WPA Guide Takes Missouri On the Road

by Timothy J. Fox

Books don't lead lives of their own; the lives they lead are granted by the experiences of their readers. The Works Progress Administration's *Missouri: A Guide to the "Show Me" State* is a case in point. For more than half a century, it has contributed to thousands of Missourians' understanding of their state, their communities, and themselves. When the Missouri Historical Society Press in St. Louis announced its plans to reprint the book for another generation of readers last year, University of Missouri professors Walter Schroeder and Howard Marshall quickly agreed to contribute a revised and expanded introduction to this classic work.

For Schroeder and Marshall, *Missouri: A Guide to the "Show Me" State* has been a part of their lives since they first encountered it. When the book was originally published in 1941, Schroeder was a boy who enjoyed being the "navigator" on his family's Sunday-afternoon outings. "My family didn't have a car," Schroeder remembers, "but my mother's sister did. During World War II, we used the *WPA Guide* in our car as we drove around the state. We had that book right up there in the front seat, and whenever we got to a place, we would read the description of it. I still have the original copy, and I still use it."

In 1959, nearly 20 years after the book had first come out, Howard Marshall was a high school student in Moberly, Missouri. "My civics teacher had a copy of the guide. She was one of those teachers who helped me get interested in local history and geography, place names, and things like that. I've been interested in them ever since."

Missouri: A Guide to the "Show Me" State was part of the American Guide Series, a group of state guide-

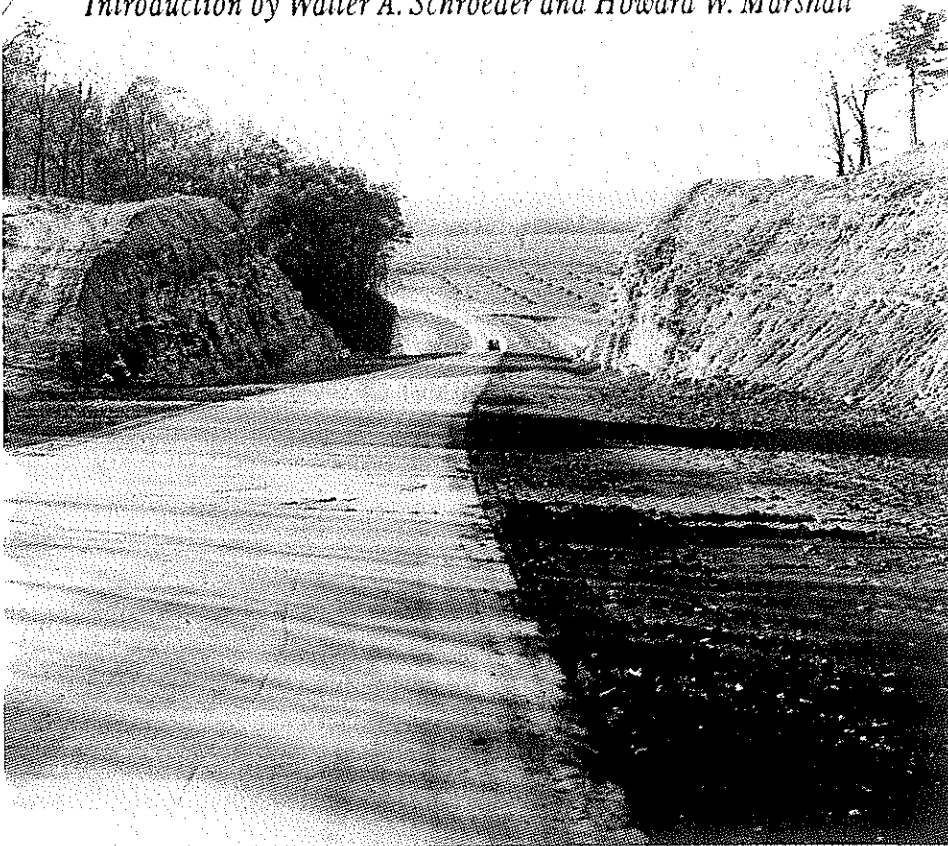
books produced in the 1930s by the WPA's Federal Writers' Project. (A 1985 paperback edition by the University Press of Kansas changed the title to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Missouri*, while the Missouri Historical Society Press's reprint changes the title again to *Missouri: The WPA Guide to the "Show Me" State*.) A 27-year-old architectural historian, folklorist, and future Missouri Historical Society president named Charles van Ravenswaay headed up the Missouri Writers' Project, men and women who traveled the state seeking out all aspects of Missouri's culture.

"No comprehensive guide to Missouri—or to any other state—had been attempted before the Federal Writers' Project launched the American Guide Series in 1935," van Ravenswaay wrote in his foreword to the 1985 paperback edition. "Under normal circumstances, creating a state guidebook would have been difficult, but the 1930s were far from normal." The newfound freedom of travel and technological improvements of the era had been counterbalanced by the painful realities of the Great Depression; President

MISSOURI

The WPA Guide to the "Show Me" State

Introduction by Walter A. Schroeder and Howard W. Marshall



A MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY CLASSIC REPRINT

The cover of the Missouri Historical Society Press's reprint of *Missouri: The WPA Guide to the "Show Me" State* depicts Watson Road in St. Louis County. (Photograph by W.C. Persons, ca 1931. Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis)

Franklin Roosevelt ushered in his New Deal to help put people back to work. "The time of the *WPA Guide* was a very important and interesting time in history," Marshall says. "It's almost the first time the federal government paid up front to hire people to go out and study themselves."

According to Schroeder, an assistant professor of ge-

ography at the university, all the Federal Writers' Project's workers did a good job of studying themselves, but Missouri's writers did especially well. "First of all, the use of language is just so beautiful in the book," he says. "It's a work of literature as well as geography. But Missouri's guide is also richer in detail than many of the other guides. It's a bigger book, not because we're a more populated state, but because it has more information about places. And it's very difficult to find either incorrect or misleading information in it."

The book's depth and accuracy is attributable mostly to van Ravenswaay, who brought to the project his fascination with the built environment and material culture. "I think that our Missouri book is distinctive because of van Ravenswaay," says Schroeder. "He gave it its emphasis on architecture; in every locality he showed his eye for picking out architectural details."

Becky Schroeder—general editor of the University of Missouri Press's Missouri Heritage Readers Series and no relation to Walter—remembers well van Ravenswaay's remarkable eye for detail. In June 1986, she and her husband, "Dolf," traveled around the eastern side of the state with van Ravenswaay, stopping in Kimmswick, Ste. Genevieve, Cape Girardeau, and several smaller towns. In Caledonia, the nearly 75-year-old van Ravenswaay led his companions down an old gravel road he remembered from his WPA days. There was an old

house up to the left that employed some fascinating Scottish design elements, he told the Schroeders, and proceeded to take them right to it. The house's owner allowed the group inside, and van Ravenswaay quickly complained that a stairway had been moved from one side of the room to the other. The owner sheepishly admitted that yes, he had moved the stairway.

"Charles was a storehouse of information on Missouri and its building traditions that we didn't know anything about," Becky Schroeder states. "Very sadly, we had always plotted and planned to go down the other side of the state with him, but he never came back to Missouri for a trip of that kind."

For those who were not lucky enough to have traveled the state with van Ravenswaay, the *WPA Guide* provides the next best thing: a tour of Missouri before interstates, before fast food, before Branson was BRANSON. The book offers readers a snapshot of Missouri, frozen in time. "It's sort of like thumbing through your family albums," says Marshall, chair of the university's Department of Art History and Archaeology. "It's like seeing a picture of Uncle Bill on the back porch and wanting to go out and see if the house is still there, although Uncle Bill is dead. These things interest a lot of people, and van Ravenswaay was so good at the way he presented it. Whatever part of the state you live in, you could find things to go look for and become aware of."

Marshall and Schroeder approach the book from different academic perspectives, but the book remains tremendously valuable for each. "We in geography would call it a geography book, there's no question about that," says Schroeder. "It gives you a description of a locality and then tries to explain it. That's what geography does." Marshall, on the other hand, finds the *WPA Guide* useful for documenting buildings that are in danger of disappearing. "I teach historic preservation, and a tremendously important area in historic preservation for me is documenting the existing built environment," he says. "I'm interested in ordinary people and ordinary buildings, and a big part of historic preservation is documentation and ethnography. That's what this book is—an ethnographic statement about a particular time and place."

The American Guide Series' emphasis on "ordinary people and ordinary buildings" introduces another aspect the Federal Writers' Project: politics. "the WPA had a political goal that we forget about," says Marshall. "At the time, socialism was hot, and a lot of people in the WPA were accused of being 'Commies' and Soviet sympathizers, and in fact, some of them were. But that doesn't play heavy in van Ravenswaay's work. Van Ravenswaay was a local guy from Boonville, and as far as I can tell he was never into the politics of it." Still, Marshall says, the book glorified common people and common structures: "That's a powerful political statement by the federal government using your tax money!"

Both men agree that the book has aged gracefully over the past 50 years. "It's become really obsolete in the big urban areas," Schroeder remarks. "But I exhort my students to use the book to get into those parts of the state that they wouldn't normally get into. When I take field trips with my students or professional groups, they're always interested in the descriptions in this book because they are so different from interstate travel." Marshall finds that the *WPA Guide* charts the evolving cultural identity of all Missourians, whether urban or rural, rich or poor, black or white: "You can't figure out who you are unless you figure out who you've been," he says. "For anybody with the slightest interest in the history of any place, it's terribly important to follow change, and with this book you can do that from the late thirties or early forties to the present."

"It is not a 'chamber of commerce' type book," Schroeder adds. "It's the kind of writing that after you read it you can say, 'Hey, we've had our faults, we've had our successes, we have our beautiful spots of ethnic diversity, and places where we've despoiled the environment, but that's us!'"

One of the book's representative moments is Irving L. Dilliard's opening essay, "People and Character." In less than nine pages, Dilliard attempts to sum up who Missourians are, and what Missouri is. Ultimately, he is forced to admit that Missouri defies classification: "Our definition of Missouri, however detailed, cannot be complete," Dilliard writes. "Missouri will not be catalogued. It cannot be written down."

He may be right, but Schroeder and Marshall would agree that Dilliard, van Ravenswaay, and the other participants in the Missouri Writers' Project came as close to capturing the state and its people as anyone ever has, or likely ever will. "People seem to think that we're homogenizing the country," Schroeder says. "Air terminals are the same whether you're in Atlanta or Kansas City, people buy the same products, they eat at the same fast-food places, they buy at the franchise dealers in the malls. But if you get out of this, you find that there's still a lot of variety and heterogeneity in the landscape that bring this richness, this fullness to the geography of the state that we need to savor and enjoy. The *WPA Guide* helps us do that."

Missouri: the WPA Guide to the "Show Me" State (\$24.95, paper) is distributed by the University of Missouri Press, 800-828-1894.

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