

The State Historical Society of Missouri

Winter 2024

# MISSOURI TIMES



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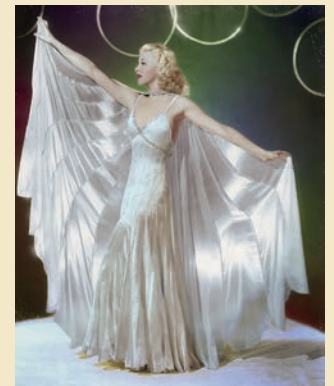
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## COVER PHOTO



Ginger Rogers publicity photo for *Swing Time*, 1936. The American Film Institute put the RKO Pictures release starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire among its top 100 films of all time.

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# David Steward Reflects on How His Small-Town Missouri Roots Helped Him Build the Largest Black-Owned Company in the United States

By Beth Pike

**G**ROWING up in segregated Clinton, Missouri, in the 1950s, David Steward leaned on his family, his faith community at St. James Methodist Church, and a steadfast will and determination to make the most out of his life. Lessons from his upbringing led to success on the basketball court and a degree at Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg; advancement in sales in the railroad industry; and becoming one of the top salespeople at Federal Express. Steward kept moving his ideas forward. In 1990 he founded World Wide Technology, a global technology service provider, in St. Louis. He remains chairman of the private company, which moves a lot of data and employs 9,000 people around the world, generating \$17 billion in annual sales.

Steward spoke about how Missouri has shaped his life in a conversation with SHSMO executive director Gary Kremer as part of the annual My Missouri lecture series on October 28, 2023. Their talk came after the annual meeting of the State Historical Society of Missouri. In 2019, Kremer interviewed Steward's mother, Dorothy, for an oral history project. The first Steward ancestor to appear in the Missouri census was James Massingale, born in 1849 in Henry County, likely as an enslaved person. Five generations later, the Stewards would become one of the most successful families in the state.

"We were self-sufficient with walnut and pear trees and farm animals on our land," said Steward, who also remembered not having indoor plumbing in his family's house the first half dozen years of his life. "Living in a segregated town, we never felt any less than anybody else, and that was because of my parents. We had chores, responsibilities, and church."

Steward recalled one of the most profound things that happened in his young life occurred when his mother attended a recruitment meeting for a Boy Scout troop in his hometown. Dorothy had been her son's den leader in Cub Scouts, and it was time for the young Steward to advance to the next level of scouting. Several days after



David Steward (right) speaks to Gary Kremer (left) about his life growing up in Clinton, Mo., Oct. 28, 2023.

the meeting, Dorothy broke the news to her son that he could not join the local Boy Scout troop because he was Black. "We cried together," said Steward.

Decades later, that heartache resurfaced when Steward was asked to chair the Greater St. Louis Area Council of Boy Scouts.

"The power of forgiveness, the power of grace; it's interesting because I had the pleasure of running the entire St. Louis area office," Steward said. "Then, I ran the central region for three years and sat on the national Boy Scouts board."

Steward and his wife Thelma have been married for 47 years. They raised a son and daughter who are successful in the entertainment industry. Steward sees Missouri as a place with a work ethic, core values, and a spiritual foundation that anyone can tap into. "There is giving, caring and compassion for people here in this state of Missouri that you don't find anywhere else. And I'm all over the world," said Steward. "I think we need to understand our power that's here and get our children to recognize it for generations to come."



# Annual Meeting Reflects on 125 Years since SHSMO's Founding in 1898

Photographs by Notley Hawkins

**M**EMBERS, trustees, and staff of the State Historical Society of Missouri met for the Annual Meeting Oct. 28, 2023, at the Center for Missouri Studies in Columbia. Former U.S. Senator Roy Blunt presided over the meeting as the president of the Board of Trustees. 2023 marked the 125th anniversary of the founding of the State Historical Society of Missouri by the Missouri Press Association. A large display in the Wenkeker Family Corridor looks back at the Society's history since its beginning in 1898. The exhibit on the second floor of the Center for Missouri Studies will be on display through March.

SHSMO awarded prizes to several authors for their publications in 2023. The honorees include Gregg Andrews, who received the Missouri History Book Award for *Shantyboats and Roustabouts: The River Poor of St. Louis, 1875-1930*. The Lewis E. Atherton Prize for best dissertation went to Patrick Ayres of Southern Illinois University-Carbondale for "The Conservative Heart of the Nation: Political Conservatism in the Civil War Era West." The James W. Goodrich and Lynn Wolf Gentzler Missouri Historical Review Article Award was presented to Sarah J. Gross for "The Organization, Establishment, and Legacy of the Missouri State Militia: A Historical Approach to Understanding Veterans' Benefits" (July 2023 issue),



Members of the Board of Trustees in attendance at the SHSMO Annual Meeting.

and the Mary C. Neth Prize for women's history was awarded to Elizabeth Eikmann, author of "Soul

Sister Pictures: The Photography of Emme and Mamie Gerhard" (April 2023 issue of MHR).



Former U.S. Senator and current president of the Board of Trustees Roy Blunt presides over the SHSMO Annual Meeting, Oct. 28, 2023.



Seventh-grade student Collin Sybert of Rosendale, Mo. performs as U.S. President Harry S. Truman at the Center for Missouri Studies during the Annual Meeting weekend. Collin became North Andrew Middle School's first-ever National History Day medalist in 2023 for his performance of Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb.



Patrick Ayres receives the Lewis E. Atherton Prize for best dissertation from Roy Blunt.



Sarah Gross receives the James W. Goodrich and Lynn Wolf Gentzler Missouri Historical Review Article Award from SHSMO executive director Gary Kremer.



# SHSMO Helps Communities Preserve Local History with Brownlee Grants

By Beth Pike

**E**ACH time *Ozark County Times* editor Sue Ann Jones needed to add historical context to a story she was writing, she felt sad seeing tattered stacks of old, crumbling boxes that held loose copies of the newspaper dating back to 1883.

“At the office, we often discussed what we might do to help preserve the older unbound issues, but we didn’t know how to proceed—and of course, money was always a concern,” Jones said. “Then I came upon an email announcing the Brownlee Local History Grant, and after searching for archival newspaper boxes, I was ready to approach the Ozark County Genealogical and Historical Society with a solution.” The *Ozark County Times* works closely with OCGHS, sharing its digital archives to ensure that past issues of the newspaper are accessible to the public at the Ozark County Historium in Gainesville.

Jones said it was easy to apply for the grant by submitting a brief description of the project and how the funding would be spent. Gerald Hirsch, senior associate executive director of the State Historical Society of Missouri, said the process is purposefully made simple to encourage applications and minimize any administrative burden. “When the project is complete, we just ask for a short report and photos detailing the outcome of the project,” Hirsch said.

The local history grants honor Richard S. Brownlee, director of the State Historical Society from 1960 to 1985, who helped to expand the Society’s holdings of newspapers, reference materials, manuscripts, and artworks. For the 2023-24 grant cycle, awards of up to \$500 are being distributed to eleven projects. Applications are invited from August 1 through September 15, and the awards will be announced before the grant period begins in November. Applicants must focus on one of two areas to qualify: preserving local historical records, or providing educational activities to promote learning about local history. Grants are available to Missouri cultural heritage institutions that are nonprofit organizational members of the State Historical Society, with preference given to local historical societies.

*Ozark County Times* owner Norene Prososki is thrilled that their county historical society received the Brownlee grant. It enabled them to purchase 30 archival boxes with



*Ozark County Times* publisher Jenny Yarger (left) and her mother, *Times* owner Norene Prososki (right) inspect the *Weekly Ozark County News* from Sept. 20, 1883. Editor Jessi Dreckman is seated at the computer.



Historium volunteer Janet Tabler (left) and retired *Ozark County Times* editor Sue Ann Jones show the new archival boxes purchased with the Brownlee grant to store their historic newspapers. Photo courtesy of *Ozark County Times*.

metal-reinforced corners that keep the boxes stable when stacked on top of each other. Each archival box can store two years’ worth of newspapers. “We are writing the history every day in this community and have an obligation to preserve this record for future generations,” Prososki said.

Jones, who helped write the grant, sees the project as a way to preserve the history of the area's residents. As a sixth-generation Ozark Countian, Jones recalls that her own birth was announced in the *Times* in 1951 and her high school and college graduations appeared in the paper as well. Next were announcements on her wedding, and then on the birth of her children. "Someday, my own obituary will be published there," Jones said. "Norene knows the photo I want to be used!"

Jones said the journal serves a similar purpose for local schools, churches, and businesses. "Crimes and punishments, droughts and floods, fires and festivals, good news and bad—the history of Ozark County is recorded here in the 140 years of newspapers that have led up to today's *Ozark County Times*," Jones added. "You can't find that compiled history anywhere else."

This past year, a Brownlee local history grant helped a community in northwest Missouri preserve its past as a booming railroad town. In 1864, Marteny Skidmore arrived from Ohio in search of good farmland. He purchased 700 acres of land in Nodaway County, donating 20 acres to the Kansas City, St. Joseph & Council Bluffs Railroad Company (later called the Burlington Northern Railroad). The town of Skidmore arose on the site. After the original train depot was destroyed by fire in 1908, a new one was built. The railroad through Skidmore eventually came to an end and its tracks were pulled up, but the depot stands today as a reminder of the town's past. In 1977, the City of Skidmore purchased the depot for \$150, and townspeople later renovated the space as a museum of local history.

A \$500 Brownlee grant allowed for the purchase of new signage for the Skidmore Depot Museum. The town's mayor, Theresa Carter, hopes the welcoming sign will invite visitors to explore the artifacts collected over the years by the museum. On display is an old Bible and military uniforms from young men who fought in wars. Pages of photographs of senior classes and trophies from sports teams rest on shelves. On the wall, a framed bank robber's note demanding one thousand dollars tells a story behind an attempted heist in 1942. Carter read that the robber was chased for ten blocks around town by the banker, who eventually caught him and returned the money while the thief went to jail.

Visitors to the Depot Museum can also view photographs and learn the history of Grigsby Apple Orchard, which sent 5,000 bushels on each shipment to London in the early 1900s. Other memorabilia features the "Punkin Show" and parades that began with a celebration in 1899 to honor the farming community. Five dollars



Mayor Theresa Carter stands next to new signage in front of the Skidmore Depot Museum, Sept. 19, 2023.



Early residents of Skidmore decorate their horse-drawn carriages for the annual Punkin Show parade. Date unknown.

was awarded for the prize-winning pumpkin in its first year, a hefty sum at the end of the nineteenth century. This prosperous farming community also had a hardware store, newspaper, pharmacy, grocer, school, and two banks. Like many small towns, Skidmore went through a long period of population decline and now has fewer than 250 residents, but community pride remains, as does the annual Punkin Show. "We're saving this depot for future generations," said Carter, who has been among the many residents dedicated to restoring the town's museum. "Researching our history has been a labor of love. I tell folks who visit our depot that it will take days, if not weeks, to see what all is here."



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## Old-Time Fiddling in Full Swing at the State Historical Society of Missouri

**A**UTHOR and fiddler Howard Marshall of rural Calloway County, along with other mid-Missouri musicians, kept a large crowd entertained at the Center for Missouri Studies with toe-tapping, feisty old-time fiddling music in late November. Marshall, professor emeritus and former director of the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri, offered examples of Missouri fiddling and shared his knowledge on the history and people behind the music. Marshall's new book, *Keep It Old-Time: Fiddle Music in Missouri from the 1960s Folk Music Revival to the Present*, is the third book in his fiddle trilogy. It includes a companion CD of music by 36 fiddlers. Marshall's series on Missouri fiddling is available in the Richard Bookstore inside the Center for Missouri Studies as well as online at [shop.shsmo.org](http://shop.shsmo.org).



Left to right: Amber Gaddy (piano accordion), Asher Ferguson (penny whistle), David Cavins (guitar), Kathy Gordon (acoustic bass), Howard Marshall (violin), Richard Shewmaker (violin), and Jim Ruth (five-string banjo) play old-time fiddle music at the Center for Missouri Studies, Nov. 30, 2023.

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## Traveler Walking Across America Visits Center for Missouri Studies

**H**OLDEN Ringer took off walking on March 31, 2023, with plans to travel by foot from La Push, Washington, to Washington, D.C., raising awareness of America Walks, a program that advocates for walkable communities. After 31 weeks and wearing out six pairs of shoes, Ringer arrived at his grandparents' home in St. Joseph. Missouri is a familiar place to the 25-year-old Dallas, Texas, native. Crossing the state entirely on foot on the Katy Trail, however, proved to be a new adventure.

Along the way, he heard about fun places to explore in the mid-Missouri area and decided to visit the Center for Missouri Studies. As temperatures dipped into the low 30s in early November, Ringer experienced the coldest week of his walk thus far as he arrived at the SHSMO Art Gallery. The cold didn't stop his enthusiasm as he checked out the paintings of Thomas Hart Benton, George Caleb Bingham and the *Small Towns, Big Stories*



Holden Ringer visits the SHSMO Art Gallery in Columbia on his walk across the country, Nov. 2, 2023.

exhibition. "It's been a tough week of weather, but I met some of the warmest of hearts," wrote Ringer on his Instagram account, sharing photos of the art gallery and other places he explored in Missouri.

With good health and the kindness of strangers who quickly become friends, Ringer hopes his journey across America will continue to inspire him and the people he meets along the way. You can follow his walk at [walk2washington.com](http://walk2washington.com).



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## SHSMO Announces 2024 Fellowship Awards

**T**HE State Historical Society of Missouri recently awarded Center for Missouri Studies fellowships to two history scholars. Jenna Lyons, a visiting assistant professor at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, has won a fellowship award for her proposed study, “‘Dear Mr. President’: Bertha Bless, the Missouri Press Club, and the National Federation of Press Women.” John W. McKerley, adjunct assistant professor of history and human rights at the University

of Iowa, has been awarded a fellowship for his proposal, “Liberalism, Black Politics, and the Origins of the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 in Missouri.”

Each fellowship award includes a \$5,000 stipend. The fellowship offers an opportunity to write an article for publication in the *Missouri Historical Review* and to make a public presentation of their work. Lyons and McKerley will hold their appointments for the 2024 calendar year.



**JUDGES NEEDED**

National History Day State Contest  
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

**April 27, 2024**

LEARN MORE AT  
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or email [nhdmo@shsmo.org](mailto:nhdmo@shsmo.org)

**MISSOURI**  
HISTORY DAY

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## Coffee and Conversation with the Curator

**THANK YOU** for celebrating the State Historical Society of Missouri's 125th anniversary in 2023 and for your continued support of our mission. Coffee & Conversation with the Curator winner Paul Donnelly and two friends joined art curator Joan Stack for a tour last fall—both in the SHSMO Art Gallery and behind the scenes in the art department.

Paul won the drawing for this special tour when he renewed his membership during SHSMO's 125th anniversary membership drive. Stay tuned for more opportunities this year for a behind-the-scenes look at SHSMO!



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## SHSMO Welcomes New Staff

**N**EW STAFF members have joined SHSMO offices in Columbia and Kansas City in recent months.

**Autumn Cuddy** is assisting in the conservation lab in Columbia to preserve historic newspapers. Cuddy grew up in the Flint Hills region of Kansas and worked in various archives in Florida and Massachusetts before moving to Missouri in early 2023.

Two new archivists began work on the grant-funded digitization project of U.S. congressional papers at the Columbia Research Center. Originally from Rolla, **Zane Peterman** earned his bachelor's degree in history at Missouri University of Science and Technology and a master's degree in historic preservation at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau. Florida native **Jacob Neal** received a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Florida and a master's degree in library and information science from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2022.

**Syd Stoll** joined the Kansas City Research Center and works on the congressional digitization grant. Stoll is



New SHSMO staff members (left to right) Syd Stoll, Sarah Herndon, Jacob Neal, Autumn Cuddy, and Zane Peterman, Center for Missouri Studies, Columbia, Mo., Dec. 12, 2023.

currently processing the papers of William J. Randall. Stoll grew up in Kansas City and earned a master's degree in library science at the University of Arizona.

Also joining the Kansas City Research Center is **Sarah Herndon** of Raymore, who is working part-time as a manuscript specialist while finishing an undergraduate degree at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Herndon will begin working on a master's degree in library and information science in the fall.



Farmer Tim Green advises Ka Yang and other growers on which seeds to order for the next season's crops. Photo courtesy of Eileen Nichols.

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## Hmong Immigration to Missouri Brings New Voices to SHSMO's Oral History Program

By Doug Genens

**T**HE recent passing of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger might at first seem far removed from the SHSMO Oral History Program. However, the Vietnam War strategies pursued by Kissinger and President Richard Nixon are closely tied to a new set



of oral histories documenting the Hmong [pronounced *Mung*] migration from southeast Asia to Missouri.

Hmong history is in many ways a history of migration. Though their exact origins are unknown, the Hmong people likely originated in southern China. In the nineteenth century they began migrating into the mountainous regions of southeast Asia, particularly northern Laos, where they lived in small agricultural communities. The Hmong developed a rich culture that revolved around patrilineal clan relationships and the practice of an animistic religion. They spoke a language quite distinct from others in the region. Until the 1950s, when a written vocabulary was created, Hmong was a purely spoken language.

While America had not declared war on Laos during the Vietnam War, the military began secretly bombing it in the mid-1960s in an effort to destroy North Vietnam's supply chain. Under Nixon and Kissinger, bombing greatly intensified. By 1973, the U.S. had dropped over two million tons of explosives on Laos, making it the most bombed country on earth. The CIA also began recruiting and training Hmong people to fight against Communist forces. The controversial "Secret War" in Laos ended in 1975 after the fall of South Vietnam.

This story was brought to life in recent interviews with Cher Pao Lo and Cheutong Yang. Both Southwest Missouri residents had family members who fought for the U.S. in the Secret War. While some Hmong fled soon after the Laotian Communist Party took power in 1975, Lo and Yang initially stayed behind. Lo described the extreme persecution his family faced that eventually led them to make the dangerous crossing over the Mekong River into Thailand. Like thousands of other Hmong, Lo and Yang lived in Thai refugee camps before eventually entering America as refugees.

Lo and Yang first settled in Minnesota, where they found a burgeoning and supportive Hmong refugee community. While experiencing difficulties adjusting to American culture, they learned English, worked at a variety of jobs, and raised families. In the early 2000s, Lo and Yang joined a wave of Hmong migration to southwest Missouri. They were attracted to the region for its climate, which more closely resembled that of Laos, and for the opportunity to get back to their agricultural roots. Lo and Yang, like many other Hmong in Missouri, became farmers. Hundreds of Hmong families now live in the region and have become vital contributors to their communities.

The success of Missouri's Hmong population came through in interviews with Eileen Nichols, the founder



Der Lor stands in her field of green beans. Photo courtesy of Eileen Nichols.



Mao Yang and Cheutong Yang pose for a photograph after being interviewed by Doug Genens, June 7, 2023.

of the Webb City Farmers Market, and Jason Navarro, a history teacher at Wheaton High School. While both say they observed hostility from some Missourians, the Hmong nonetheless became crucial elements of the market and the school system. Nichols credited the growth of the farmers market to the participation of the Hmong, who not only proved adept at growing Asian produce, but also learned to grow popular American products. Navarro spoke of the important role Hmong students played in helping Wheaton achieve success in the National History Day competition with their dramatic renditions of the Secret War and Hmong migration to the United States. The State Historical Society is continuing to collect interviews on the subject of Hmong migration to Missouri and will make them available to the public through its archives.

*Doug Genens is an oral historian at the State Historical Society of Missouri.*

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# GINGER ROGERS EXHIBIT BRINGS HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR TO THE SHSMO ART GALLERY



By Joan Stack

A SPECTACULAR collection of costumes originally worn by the Hollywood star Ginger Rogers will be displayed in the State Historical Society of Missouri Art Gallery from March through August, 2024. Born in Independence, Missouri, Rogers broke into cinema as it evolved from silent films to talkies. She had already made 20 films by the time she met Fred Astaire, with whom she formed a legendary dance partnership during the Golden Age of Hollywood. Recently, a stunning collection of costumes and clothing worn by Rogers was donated to the Missouri Historic Costume and Textile Collection (MHCTC) in the Department of Textile and Apparel Management (TAM) at the University of Missouri.

To showcase these costumes, the curator of the collection, Nicole Johnston, put together the exhibition *Ginger Rogers: Dressed to Impress*, which opens on March 2 at the SHSMO Art Gallery. Johnston is excited for the public to learn more about Rogers and how she often defied social norms throughout her career. Though often remembered for full-length gowns, Rogers also frequently danced onscreen in trousers, allowing her the freedom to perform complex dance moves and reminding viewers that women could be men's equal on the dance floor and perhaps elsewhere.

In the 1950s, Rogers successfully transitioned to television, revealing her talents as an independent career woman. Johnston noted that during the youth-centered 1960s, the fifty-something actress was offered fewer film roles but she made a comeback on the stage with leads in the Broadway musical *Hello, Dolly!* and in the London production of *Mame*. During the women's liberation



Ginger Rogers publicity photo for *Week-End at the Waldorf* film, 1945.

movement of the 1970s, Rogers reinvented herself as a solo artist with an internationally successful nightclub revue featuring songs and costumes inspired by past performances.

Johnston points out that throughout her career Rogers's collaborative work with fashion designers helped shape her personas on stage and screen during an era when gender roles were changing in America. Rogers showed the world that women could be smart, self-sufficient, and creative, all while being beautifully dressed.

The *Ginger Rogers: Dressed to Impress* exhibition showcases twelve original costumes worn by the

entertainer in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as much more recent garments inspired by Rogers's clothing and designed by TAM students. "As the only university in the world with a collection of Ginger Rogers garments, our students have a very unique opportunity for hands-on research and creative scholarship using these one-of-a-kind costumes in the classroom," said Johnston.

The State Historical Society is excited to join with MHCTC in bringing this exhibition to the Center for Missouri Studies, where visitors can view this amazing collection that preserves and promotes the legacy of Ginger Rogers and her contributions to American culture. In conjunction with the exhibition, MHCTC is presenting a "Day of Ginger" on April 13. Activities include a free screening of the 1935 film *Top Hat* and a Golden Gala. Learn more at [mhctc.missouri.edu](https://mhctc.missouri.edu).

*Joan Stack is the curator of art collections at the State Historical Society of Missouri.*





Costumes worn by Ginger Rogers, designed by Jean Louis, for her nightclub revue, 1975-79.



Ginger Rogers publicity photo for *Swing Time*, 1936.



TAM student Lauren Birtz designed "Forever Female" inspired by Rogers' shimmering dress in *Swing Time*.

# Letters from the Archives Brought to Life in Video Art Installation

FULTON artist Valerie Wedel began a journey in 2019, digging deep into the SHSMO archives for personal letters that could be transformed into works of art. The plan would be to create hand-painted copies of select letters, artistically “age” the writings, and use projectors to make the letters move on walls. By animating the text, Wedel hoped to bring these passages back to life.

The idea sprang from the University of Missouri Artist in Residence project, which began working with Wedel and the State Historical Society in 2019 to create an installation at the Society’s new building on campus. With the help of a small research team of staff and friends, Wedel considered about four dozen letters for the exhibit that addressed some of Missouri’s particularly noteworthy historical experiences such as a cholera epidemic, westward expansion, war, and slavery.

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the process when the building temporarily closed to the public, putting plans for the installation on hold. Wedel finally opened the exhibit, *Resurrection*, inside the SHSMO Art Gallery in late 2023. The video installation continues through March 30.

Wedel realized that the letters spoke to her in different ways as she narrowed the project down to two dozen letters. “While I was handcopying the script, their words painted cinematic scenes in my mind—a soldier writing home from the trenches in World War I; steamboat travelers burying a fellow passenger on the riverbank by torchlight; a slave woman named Ann asking her Civil War soldier husband to ‘send our little girl a string of beads to remember you by,’” recalled Wedel.

As visitors step into a darkened room, large-scale letters appear on the wall as the first layer of text. The letters are torn, crumpled, and scattered to represent difficult times in the state’s history. For the second layer, Wedel reversed the projected text to white on black and animated them using PowerPoint, a simple technique for this piece.

Visitors are invited to read copies of the original letters in a binder that rests on a small desk. The letters are transcribed from cursive and typed, making it easier to read. Wedel said she hopes visitors will see that historical events happened to “real people,” and that some of the feelings shared in their letters still resonate in the experiences of our lives today.—BP



Visitors explore *Resurrection* exhibit at the SHSMO Art Gallery, Dec. 2, 2023.



Copies of the original letters and typed translation of the writings featured in the exhibit allow visitors to examine the archived letters more closely.



# The Story Behind Kansas City's Fashion Industry Icon Comes to the Big Screen

By Whitney Heinzmann



Spring Line Fashion Plates, Donnelly Garment Company, 1941.

WHILE *Barbie* became the highest-grossing film in 2023, a new movie puts the spotlight on the true story of a female entrepreneur who ignited a fashion revolution in the early 1900s. *Nelly Don the Musical Movie*, written and directed by the film subject's great-great-nephew, Terence O'Malley, opened in Kansas City theaters last fall. Ellen "Nell" Quinlan Donnelly Reed of Kansas City created one of the country's most successful garment manufacturers with her Nelly Don clothing line from the 1920s through the 1960s. The Nelly Don, Inc. Collection and the personal papers of Donnelly Reed are among the popular holdings at the SHSMO Kansas City Research Center.



Portrait of Nell Donnelly Reed, n.d.



Factory floor of Donnelly Garment Company, Kansas City, n.d.

Donnelly Reed's story is one of rags to riches. Raised near Parsons, Kansas, she was the twelfth of thirteen children. To help with her family's finances, she learned stenography at Parsons Business College in her hometown and then moved to Kansas City in 1905. Shortly after her arrival, she met her future husband, Paul Donnelly, and they moved to St. Louis so that Nell could complete a degree at Lindenwood College. After she graduated, the couple returned in Kansas City.

Nell had learned to sew at an early age, but it was not until 1916 that she began working commercially, sewing fashionable housedresses at home to sell to retail stores. The sixteen dresses in her first order were so popular that they sold out in three days. As orders increased, Nell developed a successful production line. By 1931, the Donnelly Garment Company employed 1,000 people and gathered \$3.5 million in sales. But Nell's success also drew unwanted attention to her wealth and status.

On Dec. 16, 1931, Nell and her chauffeur were kidnapped by three men who demanded a \$75,000 ransom. The case became an instant media sensation. Nell's attorney, the former senator James A. Reed, contacted John Lazia, a major figure in organized crime in Kansas City. Although Lazia claimed no responsibility in the abduction, the mobster helped police to free the pair within a few days without paying the ransom. Later, the kidnappers were apprehended and sentenced to prison.

Following the ordeal, Nell divorced Paul Donnelly and bought his share of the company, making her the sole owner. She then married Reed in 1933. After Donnelly Reed retired in 1956, the company's name changed to Nelly Don. The fashion entrepreneur remained active in politics, supported the arts, and traveled. She died on September 8, 1991. Since the original papers were processed in 2018, the Kansas City Research Center has received more material related to Nell and her company, including the Paul and Nell Donnelly Papers and the Nelly Don, Inc. Collection.

Whitney Heinzmann is the coordinator of the Kansas City Research Center.

# Cape Girardeau Research Center Reaches Across the Atlantic Ocean to Solve Mystery of 1920 Handwritten Letter

By Ann Lowe

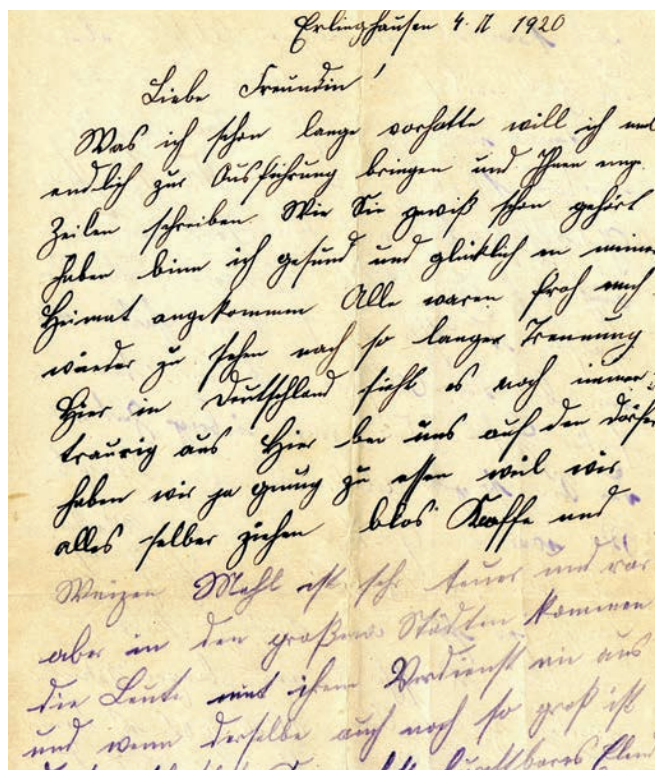
GERMAN immigrants who settled in Missouri during the first half of the nineteenth century kept German as their first language. Their American-born children learned German nursery rhymes and how to write in the old handwriting known as Kurrent, based on late medieval cursive writing. Today, only about one percent of the German population can read Kurrent and the later script, Sutterlin, which was developed in 1911.

By 1941, German schools replaced Sutterlin with the more commonly used Latin cursive and print style that we recognize today. Letters and documents written in the old script create a serious barrier to access for both researchers and archivists when trying to decipher items written as recently as the late 1930s.

The staff at the Cape Girardeau Research Center experienced this challenge when they received the Sailer-Holmes Family Papers. This small collection consists mainly of correspondence to a mother and daughter in the Cape Girardeau and Rolla areas of Missouri. The mother, Emma Sailer, was born in 1860 in Cape Girardeau to immigrant German parents, Heinrich and Johanna (Hartman) Rabich.

Emma married William J. Sailer, who worked as a carpenter. According to census records, Emma was a homemaker. Their daughter, Edith Louise, became a schoolteacher in Cape Girardeau and married William Oliver Holmes. Eventually, the couple relocated to Rolla, where they raised three children. The older letters addressed to Emma are largely written in Kurrent and Sutterlin script, unreadable to nearly all patrons.

Archivists look for ways to improve access to our collections for patrons. The staff at the State Historical Society tap into networks both formal and informal to get documents translated into English. Organizations such as the German Heritage Project in Washington, D.C. help with the translations.



Letter from Mary Sauerlin, Marsberg, Germany, Nov. 4, 1920, Sailer-Holmes Family Papers.

In the case of the Sailer-Holmes Family Papers, Missouri Times editor Beth Pike reached out to friends in Germany. Pike's friend Vanessa Schweinhaupt shared the message with her Facebook group dedicated to translating Sutterlin, which was taught in schools until Nazi policy required everyone to move to the Latin alphabet.

The Facebook group came through in force and promptly returned their translation of a 1920 letter from Marie Sauerlin, a friend of the Sailer family. Pike's German friend Ose Brandt and her daughter Lily also reviewed the letter and helped to decipher its mysterious contents, which spoke of the author's life in a small town near Marsberg in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, during the hard times that followed Germany's defeat in World War I.

"Here in the villages we do have enough to eat, because we grow it ourselves," part of the letter reads. "Only coffee and wheat flour is expensive and rare. But in the big cities the people can't make ends meet."

We appreciate the help from our German volunteers who unlocked the mystery for us. Danke Schön!

Ann Lowe is an archivist at the Cape Girardeau Research Center.



# New Film Explores Baby Tooth Survey during the Cold War

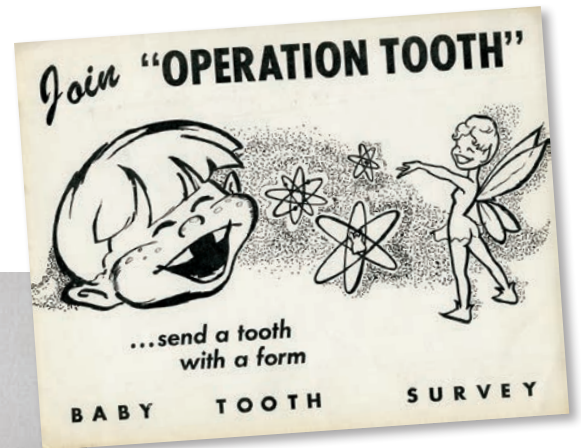
By Zachary Palitzsch

**A**N SHSMO collection from the Cold War era is featured in a new Japanese film that explores how St. Louis scientists studied radiation exposure from nuclear weapons tests by examining over 300,000 baby teeth. The documentary film, *Silent Fallout: Baby Teeth Speak*, is directed by Hideaki Ito, who grew up near Hiroshima, site of the first use of the atomic bomb in war. The film was screened at the recent St. Louis International Film Festival.

Ito's research for the film led him to the St. Louis Research Center in July 2022 to view the Committee for Environmental Information Records containing files of the Baby Tooth Survey. Accompanying Ito to help with research was Luke Ritter, author of the *Missouri Historical Review* article "Mothers against the Bomb: The Baby Tooth Survey and the Nuclear Test Ban Movement in St. Louis, 1954-1969," which won the MHR Article Award in 2018. Ritter appears in the documentary, discussing the Baby Tooth Survey and its role in ending above-ground nuclear weapons testing.

During the early Cold War period, the United States, Soviet Union, and other countries carried out hundreds of nuclear tests, creating fallout that circulated in the atmosphere and eventually was absorbed by plants, animals and people. In 1958 a group of concerned scientists and citizens formed the Greater St. Louis Citizens' Committee for Nuclear Information to collect, evaluate, and share with the public information concerning nuclear tests and weaponry and the uses of nuclear energy. The committee's first significant project was the Baby Tooth Survey, which began that same year.

Louise Reiss, a physician for the St. Louis City Health Department, directed the first Baby Tooth Survey project with funding from the U.S. Public Health Service. The project's scientists and physicians, who included prominent figures such as Barry Commoner and Ursula Franklin, collected the deciduous teeth of children in the St. Louis metropolitan region and tested them for



Advertisement for "Operation Tooth," 1958, Committee for Environmental Information Records.

Seven-year-old Tommy Blumenthal (left) of Clayton, Mo. donates his tooth to the Baby Tooth Survey. Arthur Witman Photograph Collection.

absorption of strontium-90, a radioactive isotope produced by nuclear explosions that humans absorbed into their bones through sources such as milk. Strontium-90 in high enough levels leads to increases in leukemia, bone cancer, and other health issues.

The survey began with a marketing campaign directed at young children and their parents. Advertisements requested that children send their teeth to "science" instead of the tooth fairy. Tooth donors received a button and a membership card for "Operation Tooth Club."

Over the next decade, 320,000 teeth were donated by children from around the world to help with the survey. Initial results, published in November 1961 by the journal *Science*, showed that strontium-90 levels were higher in the teeth of children born in the 1950s. A later report showed children born in 1963 had 50 times more strontium-90 in their teeth than those born before 1950. This evidence of harmful exposure was widely publicized and cited in congressional hearings that led to the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty between the U.S., Soviet Union, and Great Britain.

The St. Louis Research Center will share on social media any updates of the film's release date and where the documentary can be viewed by the public.

*Zachary Palitzsch is an archivist at the St. Louis Research Center.*

# Postcards

Offer Visual Records  
of American Life  
and Culture



By Haley Frizzle-Green

POSTCARDS are the third-largest collectable hobby in the world behind coins and stamps. The Springfield Research Center houses multiple collections from postcard collectors throughout the Ozarks, illustrating distinct styles and formats created during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whether used as advertisements, souvenirs or holiday greetings, postcards offer a unique view into the evolution of visual arts and communication.

The first two decades of the twentieth century are considered the “Golden Age of Postcards.” By the end of the 1908 fiscal year, the U.S. Postal Service reported 667 million postcards were mailed, an average of more than seven cards for every person then living in the United

States. Before the postcard craze of the early 1900s, the U.S. government printed the first “postal card” in 1873; in 1898, Congress passed an act that allowed private printing companies to produce postcards for a special one-cent rate. Privately printed postcards included advertisements, images of towns and landscapes, and early forms of personal greetings; however, senders were only allowed to inscribe messages on the front, with the back side limited to names and addresses. A major change came in 1907 when the Universal Postal Congress ordered a divided back for postcards, creating room for both messages and addresses as we see them today.

“Real Photo Postcards” became the popular medium after the Eastman Kodak Company introduced the postcard camera in 1903. It came equipped with a small door on the rear of the camera that allowed the photographer to write a caption on the negative. The styles and





Haley Frizzle-Green is an archivist at the Springfield Research Center.

formats that followed the Real Photo Postcard period included White Border Postcards (1915-1930), Linen Postcards (1930-1945), and Photochrome Postcards (1945-present). Collections housed at the State Historical Society contain postcards from each of these periods.

Postcard mailings declined when the telephone became more popular. Fortunately, many postcards ended up in the SHSMO collections, such as the Rosa McCune Mott Postcard Collection and the Jennie Ellis Postcard Collection.

Today, postcards help researchers study people and society. They can show changes over time in popular landscapes and expressions of style and language. These short greetings may also provide biographical information helpful to genealogists. If you have any postcards, regardless of their era or content, consider donating them to the State Historical Society of Missouri.



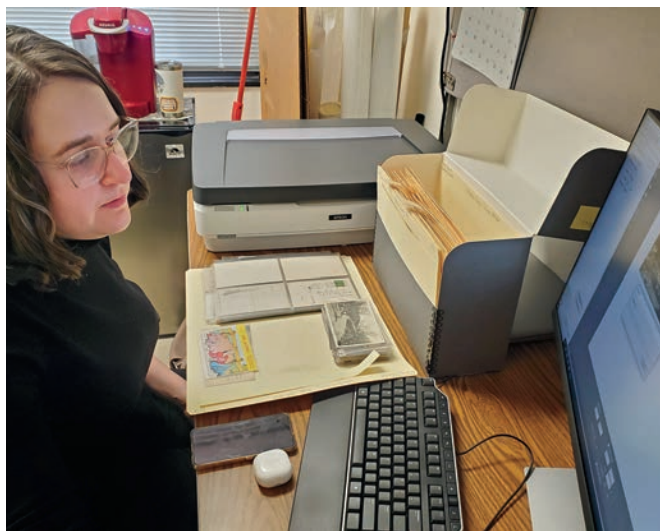


# Rolla Research Center Begins Digitization of Route 66 Material

By Kathleen Seale

WITH the centennial celebration of U.S. Route 66 approaching in 2026, the State Historical Society of Missouri has launched projects designed to commemorate the anniversary. Missourians across the state are responding to a collecting initiative of materials that document the history of the Mother Road and the people who worked, lived and traveled on the highway. Recently, the Society began a digitization project to make some of these materials more easily accessible.

Last summer, the State Historical Society received grant funding from the Melinda J. McDaniel Charitable Trust to support efforts to digitize Route 66 materials within the Society's collections. In September, Meghan Bell, a graduate student in library and information science at the University of Missouri, began working on the digitization project as a volunteer with the Rolla Research Center. Bell has meticulously scanned over 600 images, created metadata for them, and added them to the Society's digital collections.



Meghan Bell digitizes Route 66 material at the Rolla Research Center, Dec. 8, 2023.



Bell said she enjoys working on the Route 66 digitization project. "Historical preservation is extremely important, and it makes me happy to know that I can be a part of helping future generations learn about the past," she said.

The Route 66 materials will find their home in the Society's Travel and Description Digital Collection, which holds a variety of materials related to travel in Missouri and trips taken by Missourians across the country and abroad. These materials include maps, photographs, postcards, brochures, advertisements and more. Images range from businesses, motels, and novelty stores to natural attractions, road scenes, city streets, landmarks, and other scenes from the road. The digitized content dates from the beginning of the road in 1926 to recent preservation and restoration efforts. The collection includes numerous postcards from the John F. Bradbury Jr. Postcard Collection.

Bell discovered postcards with images of the Coral Court Motel in St. Louis County, which sparked memories from her childhood. "I heard about the hotel when I was a kid, but I had forgotten about it until seeing the postcard," she said. "I would've loved to have seen it! Working on the project, I've come to appreciate the old buildings and businesses that are still around."

*Kathleen Seale is the coordinator of the Rolla and Springfield Research Centers.*



# National Archives Grant Provides Additional Processing of Missouri Congressional Records

By Laura Jolley

A NEW grant from the National Historical Publications & Records Commission is allowing the State Historical Society to process the papers of Senators Roy Blunt and Christopher “Kit” Bond as well as Representatives William Hungate and William Randall. The grant award is \$500,000 and requires that SHSMO provide \$261,823 for the project for a total project cost of \$761,823. This award will provide for three new archivists who will process up to 1,489 cubic feet of congressional records through March of 2026. Detailed finding aids will go on the SHSMO website and portions of the collections will be digitized.

Roy Blunt began his career as a history teacher for Mansfield High School and became a rising star in Republican politics in Missouri. He entered politics as Greene County Clerk in 1973 and won the statewide office of Missouri Secretary of State more than a decade later, holding that position from 1985 to 1993. Blunt won the seat in Missouri’s 7th Congressional District in 1996 and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2010, retiring in 2023.

In 1972, Missourians elected 33-year-old Kit Bond as governor, making him the youngest governor in the state’s history. In a surprising upset in 1976, Bond lost a reelection bid to Joseph Teasdale. He came back in 1980 to win the governorship for one more term. Bond represents an early example of a wave of Republican leadership in the state of Missouri that began with the election of John Danforth as attorney general in 1968. Bond was elected U.S. Senator for Missouri in 1986 and continued in that role until he retired in January 2011, when Roy Blunt succeeded him.

William Hungate was born on December 14, 1922, and grew up in Bowling Green. After receiving degrees from the University of Missouri and Harvard University, he served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He won



Left: SHSMO archivist Jacob Neal processes the congressional papers of Sen. Roy Blunt, Dec. 15, 2023.

Below: Invitation to a garden party at the Ambassador’s Residence in Washington, D.C., from Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip to Sen. Blunt and wife, Abigail, May 7, 2007.



election to the U.S. Congress as a Democrat in 1964 and then was reelected to five more consecutive terms. President Jimmy Carter nominated Hungate to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri in 1979, where he served until his retirement in 1992. He presided over the St. Louis Public Schools desegregation case in 1981.

William Randall was born on July 16, 1909, in Independence. He attended schools in Kansas City before graduating from the University of Missouri in 1931. He then earned his law degree from the Kansas City School of Law in 1936. Randall practiced law until he was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II. Randall became a judge in Jackson County after the war and then won election for the 4th Congressional District in 1958 as a Democrat. He served in Congress until 1977.

*Laura Jolley is the assistant director, manuscripts, at the State Historical Society of Missouri.*

# Volunteer Spotlight

## Marcie McGuire

By Beth Pike

Marcie McGuire discovered a trove of family history while going through her deceased mother's belongings in 2013. Neatly stored in a closet were some 250 letters her grandparents wrote to each other while courting in 1918. The letters revealed her grandmother's life as a college student and the changes brought by World War I while her grandfather served as a US Navy sailor. Heartbreaking stories about the Spanish flu were contained in these personal letters, along with words of contentment in normal routines of daily life. It was a time of global suffering, yet also a time when young love was blooming.

World War I ended, and Elma Beatty and Elliot Cranfill married and raised a family before returning to their hometown of Georgetown, Kentucky. A century later, their granddaughter put her professional skills as a librarian and editor to the task of organizing the letters and providing context for them in her recent book, *Love Letters: A Nation at War*, published in 2022.

"My mom was a college English professor and she saved everything, including 6,000 books," said McGuire, who has the same love for the written word. "Finding these letters from my grandparents had extra meaning by bringing their history to life."

McGuire said she spends much of her time these days "going down the ancestor rabbit hole" and writing about her family's history. In addition, the retired editor volunteers at the State Historical Society on Wednesday mornings. McGuire has been transcribing letters in the World War II manuscript collection and also recently transcribed journals from a riverboat captain, Edmund Gray, who piloted a steamboat on the treacherous Missouri River in the late 1800s. "His handwriting was difficult to read, and having to write on a moving ship likely didn't help," said McGuire, who found it interesting to follow the daily logs as the river stages changed with the seasons. "He wrote a great deal about the weather, but also about life on the river as the crew traveled downstream and then back up again." Some of the Edmund Gray Papers collection is now digitized and online at the Society's website.

McGuire came from Kentucky to Columbia in 1982. Before the move, she had been a librarian working with persons who are visually impaired or blind. When her former husband accepted a teaching position at Stephens College, McGuire went back to school for a second master's degree in English at the University



Marcie McGuire poses for a photograph at the Columbia Research Center, Oct. 4, 2023.

of Missouri with a focus on creative writing. She then spent 28 years editing educational publications at Mizzou. After a career editing other people's words, McGuire began writing poetry before turning her attention to piecing together her family tree. She said the genealogy series presented by Bill Eddleman, coordinator of the SHSMO Cape Girardeau Research Center, has been especially helpful, as well as learning the process of how SHSMO archives letters in various collections. "Genealogy is a good entry into learning more about history. The more I dig in, the more questions I have about the past," said McGuire.

The branches of McGuire's family tree extend to the next generation. She is the mother of two grown sons. Her oldest child is retired from the United States Army and her youngest son is a scientist working in the U.S. Antarctica Program as part of the National Science Foundation.



# Looking Ahead

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## **History on Elm – Second Tuesdays, 12 p.m. – 1 p.m. Monthly** (September through June) Cook Hall, Center for Missouri Studies

Join us February 13 to learn about the history of Missouri's Indigenous population with author Greg Olson. On March 12, journalist and author Susan Croce Kelly examines the extraordinary life of Lucile Morris Upton, who was on the front lines of newsgathering and the development of the Ozarks. "Celebrity Historian" Raffi Andonian takes us on a journey of the American Dream on April 9, exploring the origins of an ethos that continues to inspire people from all over the world. On May 14, ride along with humorist John Robinson, who drove every mile of every road on the Missouri state highway map and shares experiences from his road trip. Before the series takes a short summer break, come hear retired journalism educator Bill Cloud speak on June 11 about his hometown of Pleasant Hill and memories of the small Missouri railroad town during World War II.



## **Missouri Conference on History**

**March 13-15, 2024, Courtyard by Marriott Hotel, Columbia**

The sixty-sixth annual Missouri Conference on History, hosted by the State Historical Society of Missouri, will bring scholars, teachers, and other professional historians to share ideas, research, and information on teaching, scholarship, and publishing. Visit [SHSMO.org](http://SHSMO.org) to register and attend.



## **Designing with Ginger Rogers**

**March 2 through August 2024, SHSMO Art Gallery, Center for Missouri Studies**

A collection of costumes originally worn by Hollywood star Ginger Rogers will be on display in the SHSMO Art Gallery, in collaboration with the University of Missouri's Department of Textile and Apparel Management. Learn how the actor and entertainer from Independence, Missouri, inspired contemporary apparel design by students in the Department of Textile and Apparel Management. The SHSMO Art Gallery is open to visitors Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. and each Saturday, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

## **History Day in Missouri**

**April 27, 2024, University of Missouri-Columbia**

SHSMO is excited to host students in grades 6-12 from across the state who advance to the state contest of the National History Day competition. Students will compete in categories including documentaries, exhibits, papers, performances, and websites. Interested in being a volunteer at the state contest? We could use your help! Learn more at [NHDMO.org](http://NHDMO.org).





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