

**Missouri - The WPA Guide to the "Show Me" State (1941)**

Like the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), the WPA (Works Projects Administration) was created in 1935 to provide appropriate work for unemployed people. Not only were craftsmen and laborers out of work but people practicing the fine arts were jobless, too. The WPA project also included the Federal Writers' Project, aimed at giving writers and photographers creative outlets.

The Writers' Project produced the American Guide Series, wherein each state offered a tour guide. These guides did not endeavor to be merely a verbal tourist map but to describe a region's cultural heritage and diversity. They were intended, in the midst of a profound crisis, to reaffirm the wonders of a great country.

Charles van Ravensway headed the Missouri Project from 1938 to publication in 1941. He applied his considerable editorial and administrative talents in the production of Missouri's enduring volume. Charles van Ravensway subsequently served as director of the Missouri Historical Society for sixteen years.

The Guide has been reprinted twice since 1941 (1986, 1998). In the 1986 reprint, van Ravensway wrote, "Even now, so many years after I became involved with the Missouri project, I can still feel the excitement of taking part in a great national act that rediscovered and reaffirmed faith in America during a time of fearful uncertainty."



Entering Waynesville in the early 1940s from the east. Businesses included several military stores, a "Roler" Rink, and Western Auto. Courtesy of Mike Roark.

We include here descriptions from The Guide for three communities. Of course, there have been changes over the course of six decades but the remarks, like the Ozark hills, also have a timeless quality.

**WPA Tour 5**

ROLLA (1,120 alt., 5,141 pop.) an educational center and the seat of Phelps County. Pine Street, following a slight ridge, is the business district; east and west, and climbing the hills that surround the town, are the residential streets.

The city had its beginning in 1855, when a group of contractors engaged

in the construction of the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway selected a site near the home of John Webber on the Old Wire Road and erected an office and several warehouses. The prospect of a railroad created a mild boom. Within 6 months, 600 persons had moved there. In 1857, Phelps County was organized, and "the child of the railroad," was made the seat of government. The next step was selecting a name. According to legend, John Webber, who had tilled the land should have known whereof he spoke, wanted to call the town Hardscrabble; E. W. Bishop, resident official of the railroad, wanted it called

Phelps Center; George Coppedge, nostalgic for his North Carolina home, asked that it be named Raleigh. This last proposal was accepted and the name was spelled as Coppedge pronounced it, Rolla.

On January 1, 1861, a great crowd of people came from the hills to see their first train. With bells ringing and whistle blowing, a diamond-stacked locomotive puffed up to the new frame station, snorted a gust or two of wheezing white steam, and stopped.

As the western terminus of the sections only railroad, Rolla achieved considerable importance. Here, west-bound supplies from St. Louis and the East were transferred from freight car to wagon train. Here, too, persons en route to the Ozark highland to homestead bought their equipment and supplies. When the Civil War began, its position made the town one of the first military objectives of the Union Army. Almost overnight a great Federal military encampment came into existence; trenches were dug and earthworks were constructed. On the north and south were two great forts.

Merchants, professional men, and laborers flocked to the town. Families moved in from the hills for protection and supplies. Then, in the midst of the war boom, the railroad was extended west and, shortly afterward, the war ended. Rolla not only lost its strategic importance, but the completion of the

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**Historic Happenings**

Pulaski County organized at a meeting held at the Jesse Bileau [Ballew] residence. The new county includes parts of Dallas, Webster, Texas, Phelps, Maries, Miller, and Camden, with all of the present Pulaski, Laclede and Wright counties.

Sponsored by **Cole-Mahan Enterprises**, a Supporter of the *Old Settlers Gazette*.

Salem & Little Rock Railroad cut off a former trade territory. In 1871, however, it had a rebirth in the opening of the Missouri School of Mines. Today, its economic interests are divided. Each May, Rolla sponsors the Ozark Folk Festival.

WAYNESVILLE (806 alt., 468 pop.), at the foot of variegated rock cliffs and all but surrounded by serpent-like Roubidoux Creek, is the most venerable of Pulaski County towns, and is, as might be expected, the county seat. It has a leisurely atmosphere, unmarred by the smoke of industry and the impatient panting of trains, and but little jarred by farmers' Saturday visits or meetings of the county court. Hill people buy their blue denim and flour, their coffee, salt, and sugar with unhurried deliberation. Between purchases they talk. All are called by first names, except the very old. These receive the title of "uncle" or "aunt" and are always referred to by both given name and surname, as "Uncle Jim Corbin."

Waynesville's county court has been in existence for over a hundred years. G. W. Gibson "squatted" on the town-site early in the year 1831, when the near-by spring was a watering place on the Kickapoo Trace (later known as the Old Wire Road). In 1835 James A. Bates opened a store that served also as a temporary courthouse. More people

moved in, and in 1839 the town was platted. Harvey Wood secured the post office and named it for "Mad Anthony" Wayne.

About the time Pulaski County was organized, the "ill-famed Counterfeit bank of Niangua" set itself up with a president, cashier, clerks and a "grave board of directors." The enterprise, described by Wetmore in his *Gazetteer of the State of Missouri* (1837), flourished until "Mistress Missouri Anne Amanda Jemina Skidmore," widow of a director who had been denied his share of the profits, "sharpened her fingernails afresh, and with the extreme violence of female passion, declared a war of extermination against the counterfeiters." With her assistance the United States Marshal broke up the ring.

During the Civil War, town and county were for the South. The courthouse flew the Confederate flag, until Federal troops marched down the Old Wire Road and took over the town on June 7, 1862. A small fort was built as a base on the Federal supply line between Rolla and Lebanon. Since the war, Waynesville has tried lumbering and agriculture and at present is looking with interest upon the ever-increasing tourist trade.

LEBANON (1,265 alt, 5,2025 pop.), the seat of Laclede County, is the only urban center on US 66 between Rolla and Springfield. A sprawling town of

tree-shaded streets and frame and native-stone houses, Lebanon reflects the agricultural prosperity of the surrounding plateau. It is a shipping point for wheat, corn, oats, and hay; within the last decade, the value of its dairy products has increased from \$2,000 a year to \$2,000 a week. An overall factory supplements this agricultural income.

Although Jesse Ballew is said to have been the first man to cross the hills and settle in the vicinity, supposedly in 1820, Lebanon had its beginning when Laclede County was formed October 1, 1849. During the Civil War, the community gained strategic importance through its location on the military road between St. Louis and Springfield, the line of march for both armies. It was occupied alternately by the North and the South. At the end of the war, the town's badly disrupted economy was further demoralized by the coming of the railroad in 1868 and the re-location of the town. It is said that railroad officials, denied free land and depot in town, built their station a mile from the village center. Lebanon picked itself up and moved to the new site. As Harold Bell Wright says in *The Calling of Dan Matthews*, the residents "left the beautiful, well drained site chosen by those who cleared the wilderness and stretched themselves along the sacred right of way." Lebanon has grown and thrived on the

mud flat, with depot, yards, section house, and water tanks dominating her business district. It was in Lebanon, as pastor of the first Christian Church, that Harold Bell Wright, the novelist [*Shepherd of the Hills*], began his literary career.

*With a current road map included with the book, travelers can compare sights and tours described in the antiquated guide and see how they have developed or disappeared. As Walter A. Schroeder and Howard W. Marshall describe in the updated introduction, "The 'unmarked, dirt road, impassable when wet,' that we encounter in reading the WPA guide is no longer a hurdle to be negotiated in order to reach an out-of-the-way site." Due to nearly thirty thousand additional miles of paved roadway and endless gas stations and motel chains, every corner of Missouri is now easily accessible. And, as Missouri Historical Society President Robert R. Archibald states in the foreword, "If you are the kind of traveler who has no intention of stirring from a comfortable chair near the reading lamp, this reprint is really all the equipment you require for a fascinating journey through the Missouri of the past."*

Missouri - The WPA Guide to the "Show Me" State (\$24.95) was last reprinted by the Missouri Historical Society in 1998. It is available in bookstores or from The University of Missouri Press at [www.umssystem.edu/upress/](http://www.umssystem.edu/upress/)

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