

Roadside Beautification Efforts of the 1920s and 1930s

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In the 1910s and early 1920s, the early years of the Missouri State Highway Department, were focused on building the new road system: developing the system of farm-to-market roads and a new system of cross state highways. By the mid-1920s, there was a recognized need to improve the appearance of Missouri highways. Not surprisingly, this recognition came from a variety of sources outside the Highway Department, including Chambers of Commerce and Garden Clubs.



Figure 1: Missouri Roadway, ca. 1923^a

In 1928 the State Highway Department hired a landscape architect, Hillard Brewster. His primary role for the department was to plan landscaping to protect fills and embankments, but

^a Unless otherwise noted all images are from the Missouri Department of Transportation Negative Collection, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri.

the Department decided to make his services available to outside organization that wished to beautify and improve areas adjacent to the highway system. A memo was sent statewide to Chambers of Commerce, Civic Clubs, Patriotic Organizations and Societies, Community Clubs, and Boy Scout Troops, and to Roadside Service Stations and Roadside Camps and Parks offering the services of Mr. Brewster to design landscaping adjacent to the right of way that would enhance the appearance of the highway. This would improve the approaches to communities, making them appear nicer. It was suggested that the plantings could be financed by the civic clubs, and the work performed by the scout troops.¹



Figure 2: Missouri Roadside, ca. 1926

The Department further suggested that planting native species and wildflowers would not be expensive, because in many places, the plants could be obtained free—all that would be required would be digging them out. It was also suggested that many beautiful objects and views along the roadside were hidden by undergrowth, and that “natural rock formations, ridges covered with beautiful forests, valleys and streams await the eyes of the road users.”²

Greene County jumped on the roadside beautification bandwagon early. The Garden Clubs in the County joined together to develop attractive approaches to the cities. One early suggestion for an approach to Springfield was to line the highway with roses. Brewster recommended not using just roses, but using the wealth of native plants available in the Ozarks to beautify the approaches to the City, but consider planting native cedar, dogwood, birch, elder and sumac as well as study roses and honeysuckle.³



Figure 3: Highway 65 entering Springfield, Greene County

The first step to roadside beautification was to clean up the highways and moving the signs which “clutter up” the highway and blight the native beauty of the Ozarks. Brewster argued that it “made no sense” to place signs where they marred the landscape—merchants should have as high a sense of civic pride as other men, and would be willing to move signs to a space that was equally conspicuous, but not offensive, if asked.⁴

Springfield was the first city in Missouri to start a general program of highway beautification⁵; it would not be the last. Other cities and counties across the state banded together to improve their stretches of road.



Figure 4: Cluttered roadsides entering a community were to be beautified

In 1929 the State Highway Department sponsored a statewide Roadside Beautification Contest, which was advertised through newspapers and to civic and garden clubs. The plan was to offer certificates of award for the best landscaping improvement in the spring and summer. This would offer counties “favorable publicity on their natural beauties and progressive spirit.” The counties would offer before and after photographs, and would be judged based on the improvement, not whether it was a large or small amount of planting.⁶

The contest was such a success that the Highway Department formed a Roadside Beautification Committee to continue the work.⁷ Also in 1929 Floyd Sayers went from being a maintenance engineer to being a landscape architect for the Department.⁸

Among the early competitors in the annual Roadside Beautification Contest was the Cape Girardeau Special Road District. Under the direction of engineer Dennis Scivally, the Road District constructed over 100 miles of road in the county, including several scenic roads and roads to serve parks constructed by the road department. Foremost among these was the Cape

Rock Road, a road curving through the limestone of southeast Missouri to a park overlooking the Mississippi River, which commemorates Jean Baptiste de Girardot and the trading post he established in 1733.⁹ This trading post is considered the starting point of the community of Cape Girardeau.



Figure 5: Cape Rock Road, Cape Girardeau County

The Special Road District, with help from the State Highway Department, also planted a fifteen-mile swath of rose bushes along the main highway between Cape Girardeau and the county seat of Jackson, which became known as the “Way of the Roses”.¹⁰ This landscaping was maintained by State Highway Department forces until the highway was widened in the 1960s.¹¹



Figure 6: Highway 61 between Cape Girardeau and Jackson, "The Way of the Roses"

Another early competitor was the Henry Shaw Gardenway Association. The group worked in St. Louis and Franklin Counties to improve about 35 miles of Highway 50 from the St. Louis City limits to the Bourbeuse River. The Association was formed in 1933, and in its first year planted over 10,000 trees using funding from the National Industrial Recovery Act and the State Highway Department, and labor from the Bureau of Homeless Men. The landscape was designed by Lars Peter Jensen, director of the Shaw Arboretum and John Noyes, a landscape architect at the Missouri Botanical Garden.¹²



Figure 7: Bureau of Homeless Men planting trees along Henry Shaw Gardenway (Highway 50)

After the initial success, the Gardenway Association continued with their efforts, adding additional landscaping every year during the 1930s. The Association received a work group from the Civilian Conservation Corp, which did landscaping and roadside improvements, which included erosion control and roadside structures.¹³

In 1939 the CCC camp built two notable roadside structures. The first completed was Jensen's Point near Pacific. The Rustic pavilion sits on a bluff overlooking the Meramec River. The City of Pacific recently purchased Jensen's Point and has reopened it to the public. Later that year they constructed the Henry Shaw Gardenway Bus Stop near Allenton, which was supposed to be the first of a string of rustic stone bus stops along the Gardenway.¹⁴ Only the bus stop at Allenton was constructed. The Bus Stop was relocated to the Shaw Nature Reserve in 2002 as part of a MoDOT project.



Figure 8: Jensen's Point overlook^b



Figure 9: Henry Shaw Gardenway Bus Stop, 2002^c

^b Image courtesy of Missouri Botanical Garden Archives, Henry Shaw Gardenway Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

The Highway Department spent several hundred thousand dollars annually on planting materials, with planting materials purchased from a variety of nurseries statewide.¹⁵ These plants were used for roadside beautification efforts and for erosion control. In addition, there was a partnership with the Department of Conservation to grow trees for the use of both agencies¹⁶, and with the Missouri Botanical Garden to use materials grown at the Shaw Arboretum.¹⁷ The Little River Drainage District, in southeast Missouri, allowed the Department to use trees and plants growing wild in the drainage ditches that would have to be removed to prevent the ditches from becoming clogged with debris.¹⁸



Figure 10: Digging up trees at Missouri Department of Conservation for Roadside Planting

In 1936 alone the Department purchased 100,000 narcissus bulbs to be planted along the major highways.¹⁹

^c Henry Shaw Gardenway Bus Stop, 2002, MoDOT Historic Preservation Section, Mitigation photography

Efforts to improve the roadside did not stop with planting trees and flowers. In 1928 the highway department relocated highway 70 between Ironton and Fredericktown and constructed a new bridge over Stout's Creek.²⁰ Highway 70 (now 72) was the major route into the Arcadia Valley from the St. Louis region, and tourism was a major industry in the Arcadia Valley. Lake Killarney had been developed in 1908, and there was a summer community at the Lake.²¹ There are numerous religious assemblies in Arcadia, which provided summer retreats for city congregants. In 1928 the Ozarks Chamber of Commerce intended to issue 10,000 tourist guides to the attractions in the valley.²²



Figure 11: Route 70 at Stouts Creek Gap, 1929

The new highway was much anticipated, and local newspapers in Ironton kept readers informed on the progress of construction. East of the new bridge, at the “Shut In” the new highway was aligned next to Lake Killarney. Soon after the bridge was dedicated on June 27, 1929, community leaders started to comment on two things: one was that not having a guardrail

between the road and the lake didn't seem safe, and second that they didn't want an ugly guardrail.²³

In discussions between the community and the Highway Department, it was decided that a stone wall would be constructed along the highway adjacent to the Lake.²⁴ The Arcadia Valley is known for its granite, and had skilled workmen to construct the wall. A local quarry supplied the materials at a discounted rate, and local stonemasons contracted with the state to build the wall.²⁵



Figure 12: Route 70 along Lake Killarney, 1931

The stone walls along Highway 70 became very popular with Iron County residents and with visitors to the area. The following year, area leaders approached the Highway Department about building additional stone walls on the highway leading south out of the Arcadia Valley through an area known as the Royal Gorge.²⁶ The quarry again offered the stone at a reduced cost and local labor was used in the construction.²⁷ These stone walls became a symbol for the

area, and were used on postcards promoting the area and in State Highway Department publications showing roadside beautification efforts.



Figure 13: Missouri State Fair Display, ca. 1934^d

Perhaps the longest lasting and most widespread roadside beautification effort undertaken by the State Highway Department was a system of roadside parks and scenic overlooks, begun in 1932.

^d Fair Display, MoDOT Historic Preservation Section, Jefferson City, Missouri.

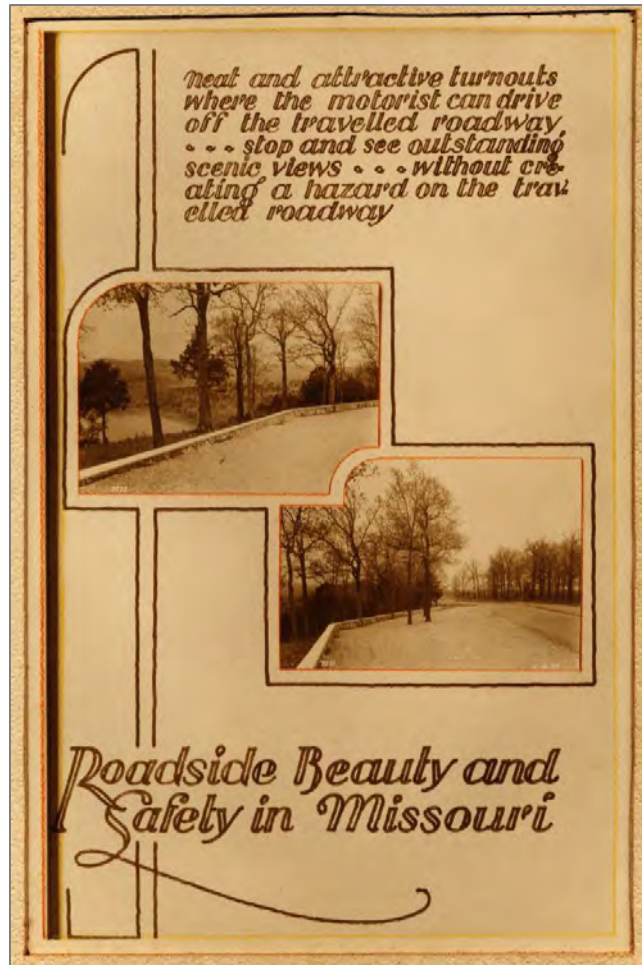


Figure 14: Missouri State Fair Display, ca. 1934[°]

Early roadside parks were built in areas that could “provide an outstanding scenic view, commemorate some historical fact or provide picnic facilities at important points.”²⁸ The first roadside park was constructed on Route 19 south of Eminence.²⁹ With the emphasis on scenic views, the early roadside parks were constructed in the Ozarks or the Ozark foothills. All of the 1930s era roadside parks and scenic views were constructed south of the Missouri River.

The Highway Department received federal Emergency Relief Funds to help construct these parks and scenic views. Additional funding came from the state Maintenance fund and

[°] Fair Display, MoDOT Historic Preservation Section, Jefferson City, Missouri.

from local sponsors; labor was supplied through Federal Work Relief Agencies, the National Park Service and the Soil Conservation Services.³⁰



Figure 15: Stillhouse Hollow Roadside Park, Wayne County, Route 34, ca. 1936

The 1936 Biennial Report notes that “a number of scenic turnouts with picnic facilities are being constructed at locations overlooking outstanding scenic attractions.”³¹ The scenic areas included the Lake of the Ozarks, Lake Taneycomo and the Ozark Mountains from Inspiration Point.³² These scenic turnouts included stone walls and trash receptacles, but no other amenities.

The same Biennial Report lists nine roadside parks with improvements funded during the biennial period. Using the names they would bear, the roadside parks constructed during the

period were Spring Creek Gap in Maries County, Riverview in Crawford County, Frene Valley in Gasconade County, Tip Top in Iron County, Forche a du Close in Ste. Genevieve County, Indian Creek in McDonald County, Mahan in Shannon County, and Stillhouse Hollow in Wayne County.³³



Figure 16: Forche a du Close Roadside Park, Highway 61, Ste. Genevieve County, ca. 1936

The development of the roadside parks and turnouts was noted by newspapers that had an interest in roadside beautification. The *Clayton Watchman Advocate*, in particular, noted their construction. The newspaper would provide its readers with information on the features of the roadside parks. In a 1936 article on the recent opening of Forche a du Close roadside park near Bloomsdale, the newspaper said the “miniature park had a massive fireplace of stone and a number of stone benches and tables. The park is located so automobile may drive to the stone retaining wall and enjoy the scenic spectacle without leaving their car.”³⁴



Figure 17: View from Forche a du Close Roadside Park

The roadside parks and scenic turnouts served public safety as well as beautifying the highways. They allowed tired motorists the opportunity to get out from behind the wheel, and they provided a way for motorists to enjoy views without causing traffic congestion along the roadside.³⁵

Roadside parks were constructed throughout the 1930s and would have continued into the 1940s. The 1940 Biennial Report notes that “the increased use of these facilities by the public seems to warrant further extension of this phase of the roadside development program.”³⁶ If not for the entry of the United States into World War II, which ended all non-essential road building, the program would have continued. It was picked up again in the 1950s, but the aesthetics of the later parks are quite different than those of the 1930s.

The involvement of the National Park Service in design review of projects that received Federal Emergency Relief Funds, guaranteed that the design aesthetic known as “Park Service

Rustic” would become associated with New Deal Era programs.³⁷ Missouri’s 1930s roadside parks are no exceptions to that rule. The parks exhibit rustic influences through their use of undressed wood for fences, picnic tables and some benches, and uncoursed stone for fireplaces and walls. The Highway Department had several standard designs for fences and walls for the roadside parks, as well as two options for fireplaces.³⁸ Each of these early parks also had a north arrow and an elevation marker.³⁹



Figure 18: Mockup for Missouri State Fair Display showing Roadside Park Features, ca. 1936^f

^f Fair Display, MoDOT Historic Preservation Section, Jefferson City, Missouri.

Missouri roadways had a certain scenic beauty even before an effort was made to beautify them. This was inevitable given the terrain of the state. The State Highway Department, working with federal, state and local agencies, worked to enhance the natural beauty of the state to improve the driving experience for Missourians and those who visited Missouri by car. They were able to take advantage of federal funds available during the depression years, and an abundance of available labor, to create beautiful roadsides. Looking at the roadside, we are still able to enjoy many of their efforts.



Figure 19: Missouri Roadside, 1938

Thank you.

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- ¹ Missouri State Highway Department, *Roadside Planting & Beautification*, no publisher, 1930.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ "State Architect Favors Planting Roadside Posies," *Springfield Daily News*, 5 January 1929, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ "A Roadside Beautification Contest," in *Roadside Planting & Beautification*, no publisher, 1930.
- ⁷ "One Year of Roadside Beautification in Missouri," *Watchman Advocate*, 10 October 1929, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ⁸ "Report of the Roadside Beautification Committee," *Roadside Planting & Beautification*, no publisher, 1930.
- ⁹ Files of the Cape Girardeau Special Road District, Cape Girardeau, Missouri.
- ¹⁰ Missouri Department of Transportation, "Rose Garden Park" file, MoDOT Archives, Roadside Park files, Missouri Department of Transportation, Jefferson City, Mo.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Austin, David C., "Henry Shaw Gardenway Bus Stop," Jefferson City, Mo: Missouri Department of Transportation, 2002.
- ¹³ Austin, 2002.
- ¹⁴ Austin, 2002.
- ¹⁵ Missouri Highway and Transportation Commission, Minutes of various meetings (8 May 1934, 9 October 1934, 13 August 1935, 14 April 1936, 12 May 1936, 10 November 1936, 6 July 1939) as held by the Secretary to the Commission, Missouri Department of Transportation, Jefferson City, Missouri.
- ¹⁶ Austin, 2002.
- ¹⁷ Austin, 2002.
- ¹⁸ Harris, Fred D. to Earl R. Schultz, Letter, 27 October 1941, Little River Drainage District Collection, folder 3291/010, Special Collections, Kent Library, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri.
- ¹⁹ Missouri State Highway Commission, *Minutes of the Meeting of the State Highway Commission held May 12, 1936*, as held by the Secretary to the Commission, Missouri Department of Transportation, Jefferson City, Missouri.
- ²⁰ "The News," *Iron County Register*, 5 April 1928, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ²¹ "Lake Killarney Environs Outstanding Tourist Goal," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, 2 August 1931, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ²² "The News," *Iron County Register*, 29 March 1928, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ²³ "The News," *Iron County Register*, 19 July 1929, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ²⁴ "The News," *Iron County Register*, 2 August 1929, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ²⁵ "The News," *Iron County Register*, 16 August 1929, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ²⁶ "The News," *Iron County Register*, 4 April 1930, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ²⁷ "The News," *Iron County Register*, 2 May 1930, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.
- ²⁸ Letter, C. W. Brown to Ray Conway, 12 February 1940, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Lloyd C. Stark Collection, folder 2551.
- ²⁹ Missouri State Highway Commission, *Eighth Biennial Report of the Missouri State Highway Commission*, Jefferson City, MO: Botz Printing & Stationary Company, 1932.
- ³⁰ Missouri State Highway Commission, *Twelfth Biennial Report of the Missouri State Highway Commission*, Jefferson City, MO: Midland Printing, 1940, p. 226.

³¹ Missouri State Highway Commission, *Tenth Biennial Report of the Missouri State Highway Commission*, Jefferson City, MO: Midland Printing, 1936, p. 445.

³² *Ibid*, p. 449.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 450.

³⁴ "Roadside Park, Highway 25, a Rustic Look-Out Over Scenic Valley," *Watchman Advocate*, 18 December 1936, Microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri.

³⁵ Missouri State Highway Commission, *Eleventh Biennial Report of the Missouri State Highway Commission*, Jefferson City, MO: Midland Printing, 1938, p. 212.

³⁶ Missouri State Highway Commission, *Twelfth Biennial Report of the Missouri State Highway Commission*, Jefferson City, MO: Midland Printing, 1940, p. 227.

³⁷ Daniels, Karen L., "The Henry Shaw Gardenway Bus Stop: Mitigation and Relocation," Missouri Conference on History paper, 2003.

³⁸ "Rock Standards", "Rustic Fences", "Fireplace A", "Fireplace B", Plans, Missouri Department of Transportation, Historic Preservation Section, Jefferson City, Missouri.

³⁹ "Elevation Marker", Plans, Missouri Department of Transportation, Historic Preservation Section, Jefferson City, Missouri.