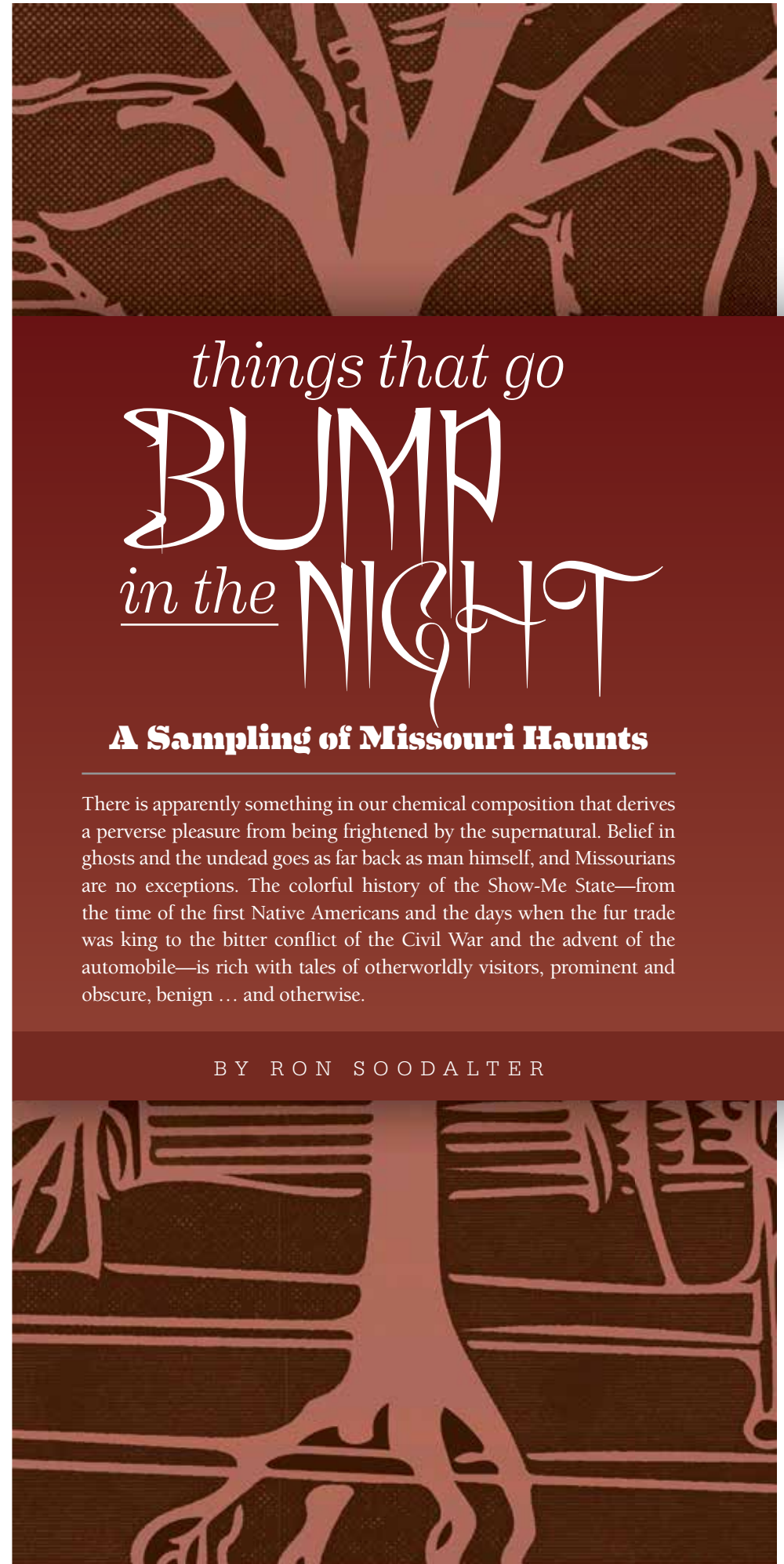




Many people, including the Travel Channel, consider Lemp Mansion in St. Louis to be one of the most haunted places in the United States. It operates today as an inn and restaurant.

HARRY KATZ

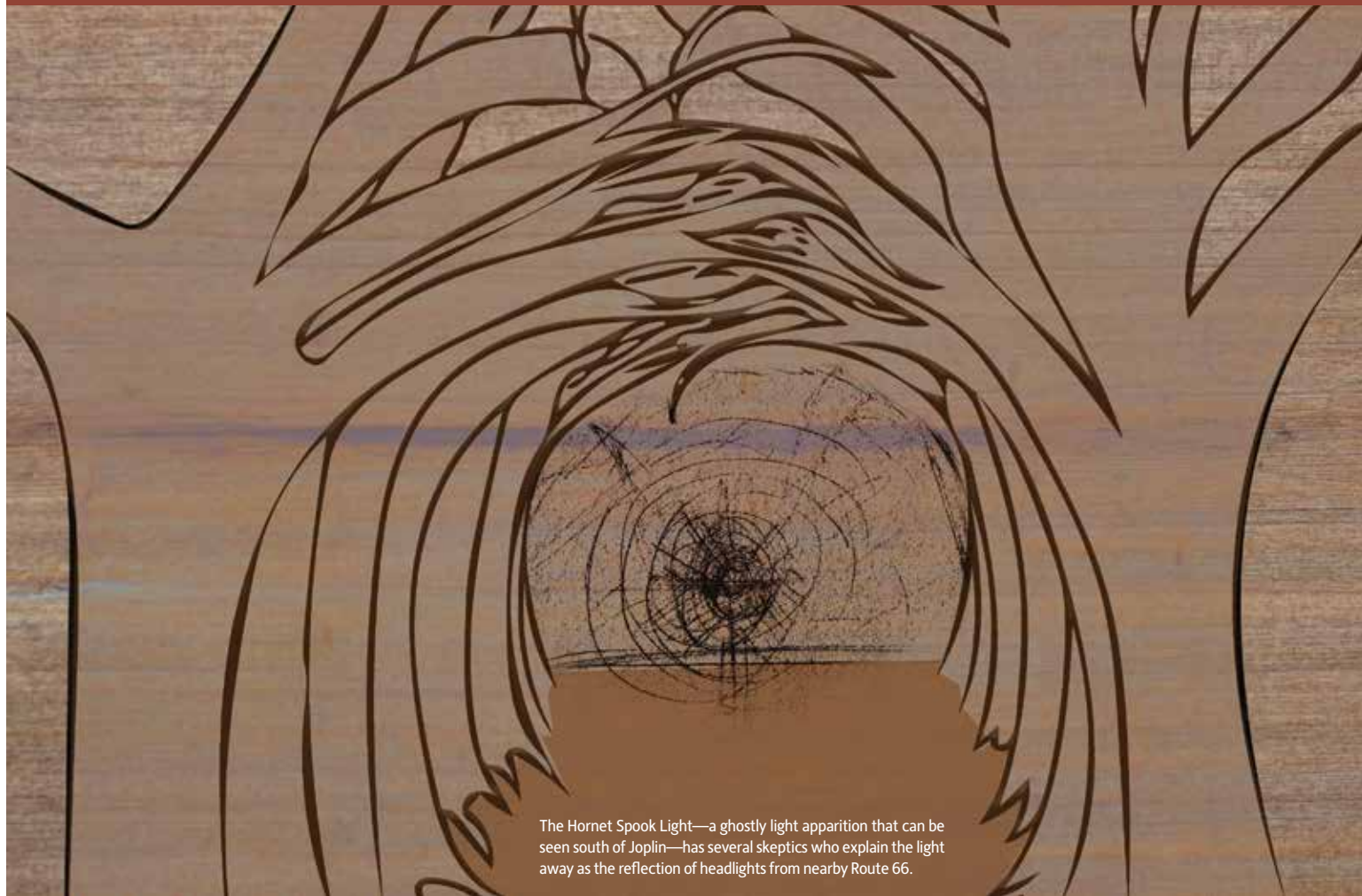


things that go
BUMP
in the **NIGHT**

A Sampling of Missouri Haunts

There is apparently something in our chemical composition that derives a perverse pleasure from being frightened by the supernatural. Belief in ghosts and the undead goes as far back as man himself, and Missourians are no exceptions. The colorful history of the Show-Me State—from the time of the first Native Americans and the days when the fur trade was king to the bitter conflict of the Civil War and the advent of the automobile—is rich with tales of otherworldly visitors, prominent and obscure, benign ... and otherwise.

BY RON SOODALTER



The Hornet Spook Light—a ghostly light apparition that can be seen south of Joplin—has several skeptics who explain the light away as the reflection of headlights from nearby Route 66.

The Hornet Spook Light

Some spirits reveal themselves as formless manifestations: a sudden chill in a closed room, an invisible pressure on one's hand, or an eerie moan. Near the tiny community of Hornet, about six miles south of Joplin, a ghostly presence takes the form of an amorphous light that is capable of hurtling down a narrow stretch of road called the Devil's Promenade. Witnesses testify that it can change color, size, and shape and divide itself into several smaller lights. Over the decades, it has gone by many names. To Missourians, it has come to be called the Hornet Spook Light.

Folklore accounts for most of the light's origin stories: the spirit of an old miner ranging the area with a lantern, seeking his lost children;

a decapitated Confederate soldier, searching for his head; the spirits of a couple, whose forbidden love drove them to leap to their deaths. According to one local legend, Native Americans first saw the light as they traveled the Trail of Tears from Florida to exile in Missouri and Oklahoma. The first written record dates to a publication, *Ozark Spook Light*, printed in 1881.

No one, however, has yet been able to provide a scientific explanation for the light. Reportedly, the Army Corps of Engineers, unable to determine the source, logged it as a "mysterious light of unknown origin." Some have attempted to attribute it to swamp gas or the glow given off by decaying wood. The erratic behavior of the light has ruled out both explanations.

Others have claimed that it is merely the refracted light from cars on nearby Route 66—an impossibility because neither the road nor the cars existed when the light was first reported. For the present, at least, the Hornet Spook Light, which has been analyzed, photographed, and in at least one instance, shot at by a local farmer, must be categorized as an unexplained phenomenon that—thus far—has done no harm.

The Ozark Madonna

By nature, ghost stories are generally tragic, and so is the tale of the Ozark Madonna.

According to some accounts, in the 1930s, a teenage girl named Laurie May Comshaw married an older ne'er-do-well named John Maumsey. John proved to be a vio-

lent alcoholic, who took to beating his hapless wife. Laurie May suffered several miscarriages because of the beatings, but she finally managed to bring forth a healthy child—a son, whom she named Luke. During that time, John was serving a brief jail term.

When home once again, and uncontrollably drunk, John threatened to hurt or, in some versions, kill the child if Laurie didn't give him money for liquor. In the ensuing struggle, the baby was knocked from her arms. Falling to the stone floor, he suffered a fatal head injury. A shattered Laurie May buried her son behind their cabin, and the next day, she hanged herself.

Another version of the story has Laurie May marrying Albert Maumsey, ten years her senior and the

owner of a sawmill. All was bliss between them until the mill failed, and Albert took to drinking. He lost their house and moved Laurie to a ramshackle log cabin in the foothills, where she delivered a baby girl. One day, a drunken Albert threatened the child if Laurie didn't quell her crying, and in trying to yank her from her mother's arms, dropped the baby to the floor.

Brokenhearted, Laurie took to wandering the hills, sobbing for her lost child. Albert disappeared from the region, seeking to escape the shame of his unpardonable actions.

Since then, many have reported seeing the ghost of Laurie May Maumsey or hearing her inconsolable weeping, as she walks along the ridges of Ozark and Taney Counties, carrying her child in her arms. As the years passed, locals took to calling her the Ozark Madonna, and so she has been known to this day. As Bud Steed, author of *Ozark Ghosts and Hauntings*, advises: "If you are hiking the old ridge top trails through the Ozarks, you might possibly come upon the grieving ghost of Laurie May Maumsey and if you do, simply walk on by and leave her to her grieving in peace."

Jesse James and Friends

Perhaps no outlaw is as notorious as Jesse Woodson James of Clay County. After the Civil War, Jesse and his brother, Frank, cut a bloody swath from Missouri to Minnesota. And when Jesse's career was abruptly curtailed, stories arose of his presence after death.

Considerable violence occurred both in and around the farmhouse of Jesse and Frank's mother and stepfather. In the early days of the Civil War, Union troops beat and hanged Jesse's stepfather nearly to death in their search for Frank, who was riding with Quantrill's Confederate guerrillas at the time.

In January 1875, a posse of Pinkerton detectives and local lawmen staged a raid on the house, based on the faulty intelligence that the brothers were home. The attack culminated in an explosion that crippled the boys' mother and killed their young half-brother, Archie.

Jesse and Frank would take their bloody revenge, but seven years later, Jesse met his fate when gang member Robert Ford shot his leader in the back of the head.

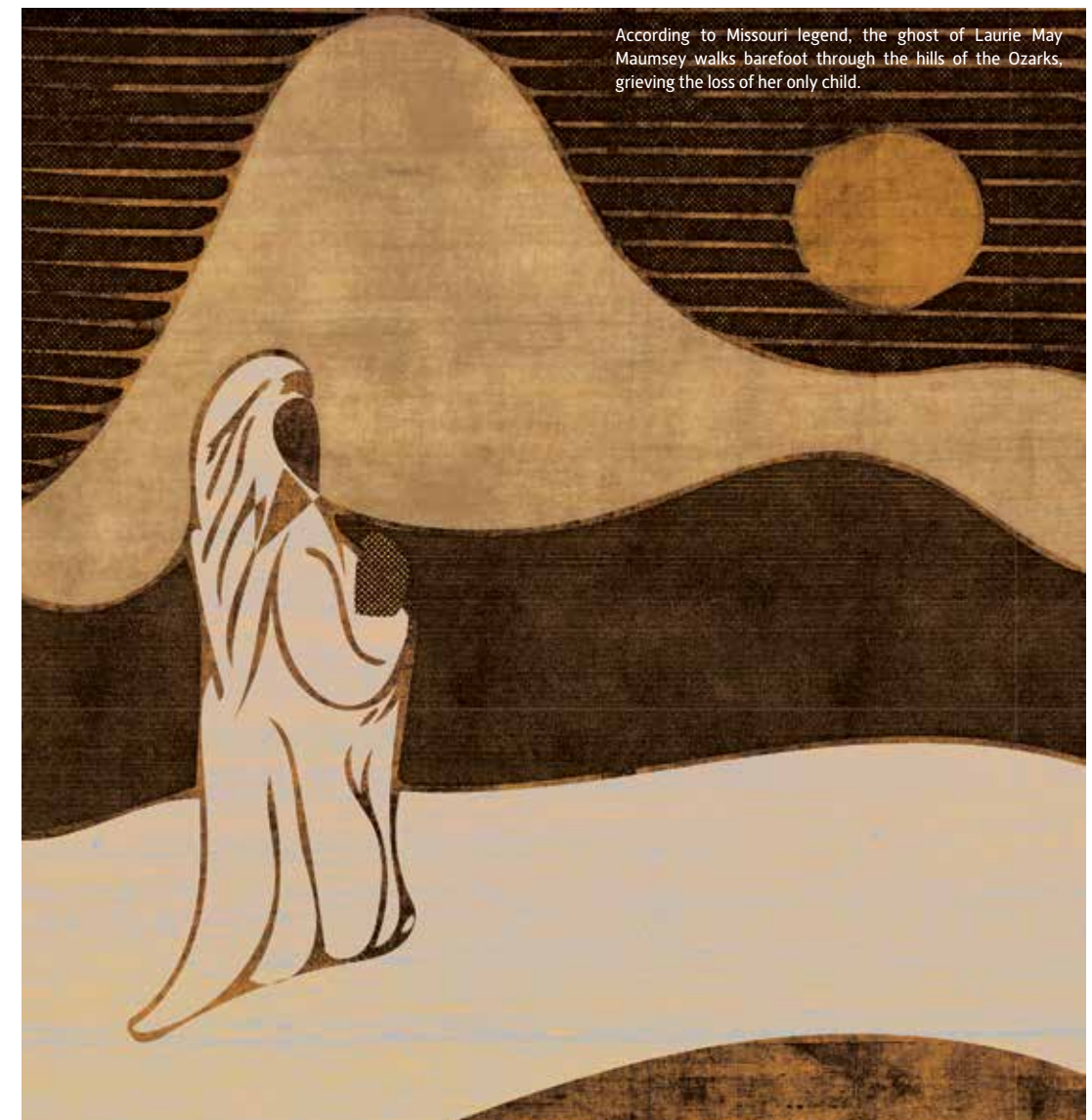
The homestead still stands as the Jesse James Farm and Museum, where tourists can roam the grounds and tour the house. For twenty years, Jesse lay buried in

the yard before being reinterred at Kearney's Mount Olivet Cemetery. According to the *Haunted Missouri* website, unexplained sights and sounds still emanate from the house and the neighboring woods. Reportedly, hoof beats ring out in the night, accompanied by pistol shots and the muffled rumblings of men.

The ghost of Jesse James has been reported as far afield as Selma, Alabama, and Bardstown, Kentucky, but he and Frank appear most frequently in the old James farmhouse. Doors slam on their own, and lights sometimes seem to move about when the house is locked. Faces appear in windows, and furniture

moves around on its own. A former historical interpreter at the farm once said that there is sometimes such a strong presence in the house that the guides themselves refuse to stay inside. She recalls walking into the house alone, and on entering Frank James's bedroom, being followed by heavy, booted footsteps. When her tour group later entered the house, they heard the disembodied steps, too.

In the words of Shakespeare's Mark Antony: "The evil that men do lives after them." If so, perhaps the James brothers still owe a debt that goes beyond time and the temporal concerns of the living.

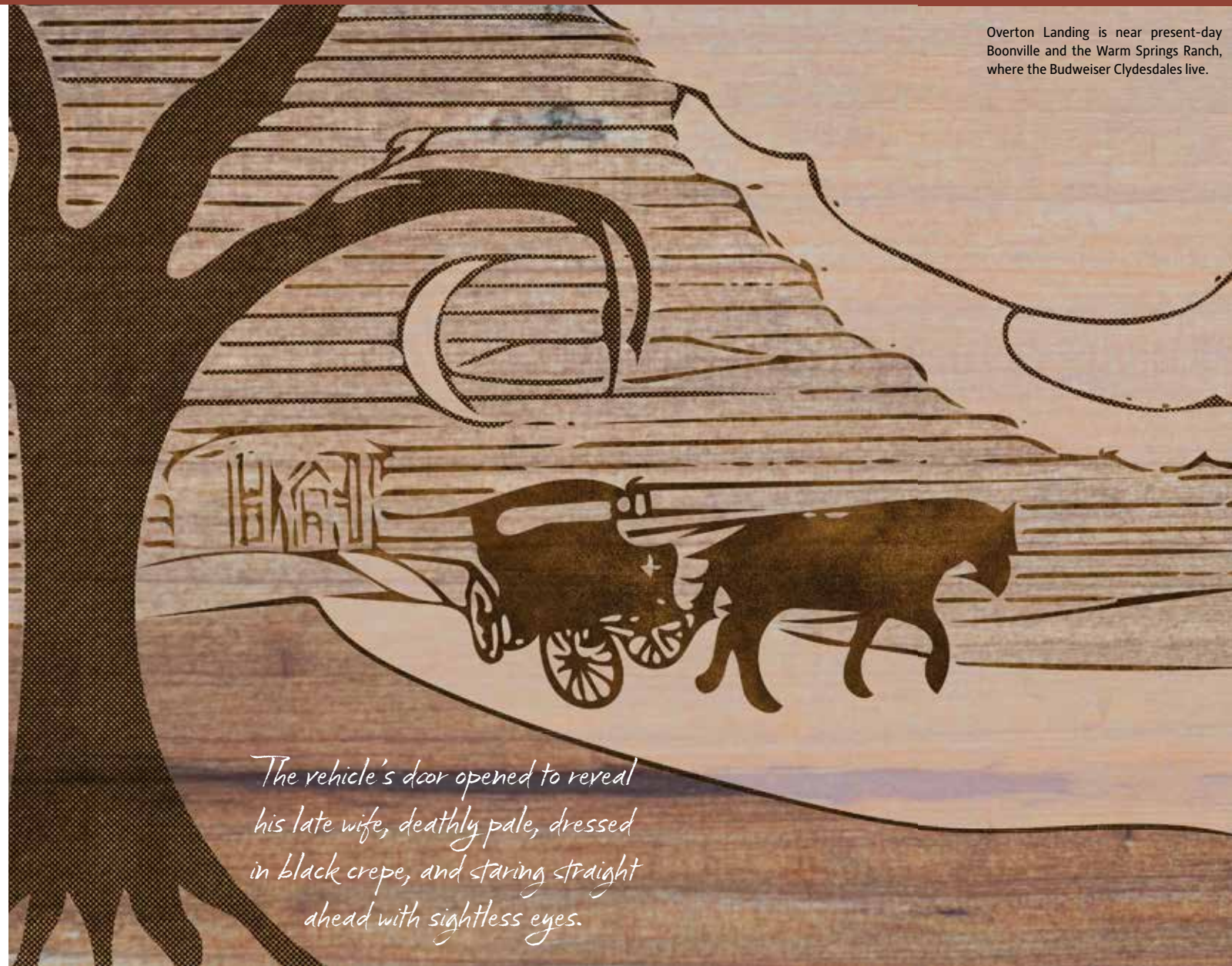


According to Missouri legend, the ghost of Laurie May Maumsey walks barefoot through the hills of the Ozarks, grieving the loss of her only child.

The Black Carriage of Overton

Overton Landing was once a small community of farms scattered along the Missouri River, just south of today's Interstate 70. In his time, folklorist Bob Dyer, who died in 2007, was known to tell the tale of a curmudgeonly old couple who kept tavern there in an old house overlooking the river. When a wealthy traveler registered for the night, they determined to kill him for the gold and silver he carried. Urged on by his wife, the old man crushed his sleeping guest's skull with a fire poker, after which the couple disposed of the body by tossing it unceremoniously into the Big Muddy. They got away with the crime and built an impressive house with the proceeds. A short while later, however, the woman sickened and died, but not before eliciting a promise from her husband to never remarry.

Within the year, the old man broke his vow and wed a young widow. The night he brought his bride home, a number of the settlement's rowdier set staged a shivaree—a noisy mock serenade, replete with catcalls, bells, horns, and the banging of pots and pans. The groom stormed onto the porch, intending to give his unwelcome guests a dressing-down, when up the road came a jet-black horse, drawing a driverless black carriage, a lantern burning on either side. Neither the horse nor the carriage made a sound. When they came to a halt, the door opened to reveal his late wife, deathly pale, dressed in black crepe, and staring straight



Overton Landing is near present-day Boonville and the Warm Springs Ranch, where the Budweiser Clydesdales live.

The vehicle's door opened to reveal his late wife, deathly pale, dressed in black crepe, and staring straight ahead with sightless eyes.

ahead with sightless eyes. As the crowd stared dumbfounded, the terrified groom walked woodenly to the carriage, entered, and sat beside his deceased wife, whereupon the horse drew its doomed passengers down the road and out of sight.

For well over a century, people have reported seeing the black horse and carriage, winding its way along the roads near what was once Overton Landing. Two lights illuminate its passengers, each dressed in clothing long since out of fashion. But whether the specter haunts the roads for good or evil, no one can tell.

The Lemp Mansion

Haunted places dot the map of Missouri, but none is as infamous as Lemp Mansion. Both *Life* magazine and the National Registry of Haunted Places list it as one of the nation's ten most haunted houses.

"The Lemp Mansion is a really rewarding place to ghost hunt," says Betsy Belanger, the St. Louis mansion's tour director. "Manifestations happen all the time."

One characteristic that raises the Lemp Mansion above others is the house's well-defined history. In

many cases, stories of those long-deceased residents who haunt a house tend to be apocryphal, born of legend, and "improved upon" by the creative and the gullible. The Lemp Mansion, on the other hand, has a well-documented history, with just the right combination of fabulous wealth, dissolution, disaster, mysterious death, and suicide.

German immigrant Johann Lemp was notable for introducing lager beer to St. Louis in 1838. He was rewarded with phenomenal commercial success, and when he

died a millionaire in 1862, his son William inherited Lemp's Western Brewing Company. For a time, it appeared that he was destined to carve a permanent niche for the family. In 1868, he purchased a splendid mansion, adding several rooms and making it the showplace that would come to bear the family name. By the late nineteenth century, the brewery's revenues had climbed to \$3.5 million annually—a fantastic figure for the time. The brewery occupied several city blocks and was turning out 350,000 barrels of beer per year.

Tragedy, however, struck early and unexpectedly. In 1901, William's favorite son and chosen heir, Frederick, died of mysterious causes at age twenty-eight. It was a blow from which William never recovered, and three years later, he shot himself. His presence has been known to roam the labyrinthine halls and corridors of the house.

William Jr., generally known as Billy, took the helm, and, along with his beautiful young wife, proceeded to run through the family fortune. Billy was thoroughly dissolute and, at one point, reportedly fathered a child by a mistress. The boy, who reportedly had Down syndrome, proved embarrassing to the Lemp family and was kept locked in the attic. Referred to as the "Monkey Face Boy," the child died young and supposedly haunts the house to this day.

Inevitably, William's failure to maintain the business resulted in diminishing profits, and by the advent of World War I, the brewery was suffering. The final blow came in 1919 when the federal government introduced Prohibition. Billy closed down the operation and sold the entire brewery for a pittance. The following year, Billy's sister, suffering from a marriage gone wrong, shot herself. Depressed over the sale of the brewery, Billy followed his sister and father in death two years later, when he entered his home office and shot himself in the heart.

Billy's brother, Charles, moved into the mansion, along with his Doberman pinscher, and lived the life of a recluse. Charles grew

increasingly morose with each passing year, and in May, 1949, he loaded a .38 pistol, shot his dog, and then himself. The mansion was sold as a boarding house and began to rapidly deteriorate.

Apparently, this is when the first reported sightings of the ghosts occurred. Phantom footsteps and knocking on the doors were heard throughout its halls. Existing tenants hurriedly left and new boarders became nearly impossible to find. One apparition in particular seems to have made his presence known to the tenants, in the form of a small, dapper man, wearing the clothes of bygone era.

The house was on the brink of demolition when it was bought for restoration in 1979. Construction crews proved as skittish as the boarders, as tools disappeared and unexplained noises occurred.

Today, the Lemp Mansion is a flourishing inn and restaurant, but the hauntings have not ceased. Both staff and guests report sightings of ghosts, the piano playing when no one is near, lights that turn on and off on their own, disembodied footsteps at all times of the day and night, and glasses that mysteriously fly through the air.

The Monkey Face Boy has been seen by passersby, staring out of the attic window. According to the *Legends of America* site, "Ghost investigators have often left toys in the middle of his room, drawing a circle around them to see if the objects have been moved. Consistently, when they return the next day, the toys are found in another location."

Footsteps have been reported running up the stairs, followed by loud kicking on what had once been the Lemp office door. This, apparently, is the ghost of Billy, who—upon hearing the pistol shot that killed his father—ran upstairs and attempted to kick in the locked door. The room itself, where two of the Lemp family took their own lives, is considerably colder than the rest of the house.

Betsy Belanger, who has worked in the house for twenty years, has seen countless manifestations and is an unshakable believer.

"You must remember that this is a spirit energy-filled house," she says. "To this day, every so often something in the house startles me, and I am genuinely frightened."

The mansion's reputation no doubt acts as a strong magnet to attract business, but the comments of many visitors convince many to accept the possibility that something dwells within the mansion, and for whatever reason, cannot find rest.

A Haunted Heritage

Missouri's history is rich in tales of the supernatural. Its towns and cities, farms and fields, and rivers and streams may harbor restless spirits from as far back as the earliest residents. While it's relatively simple to deny the existence of such things as ghosts and ghouls, there are many who insist they see—and feel—the presence of Missouri's wraiths. So, it might be wise to walk softly on the Overton roads at night, the stairways of Lemp Mansion, and the lonely ridges of Ozark County.

it's **Boz!**

Charles Dickens visits St. Louis.

BY RON SOODALTER

BY THE 1840s, St. Louis had established its bona fides thrice over. It was the site of the signing of the Louisiana Purchase, the center of the American fur trade, and the point of departure for thousands of westering migrants. But to the residents of the River City, nothing could rival the April 1842 visit of the renowned English author and speaker Charles Dickens.

It is difficult to fully appreciate the frenzy that greeted Charles Dickens when he first toured America. As Edmund Wilson wrote in a 2002 *Atlantic* article, he was “the first true literary celebrity. . . . His reception here seems to have been more that of a pop star than of a distinguished author.”

The most renowned and widely read author in the English-speaking world, the thirty-year-old Dickens had emotionally engaged millions of readers on both sides of the pond with his serialized *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*. An acknowledged sensation in his native England, Dickens arrived in America to find that his fame had preceded him. A contemporary wrote of his much-anticipated landing in Boston, “Go where you would in the city—in the hotels, stores, counting-rooms, in the streets, in the cars, in the country as well as the city—the all-absorbing topic was the ‘arrival of Dickens!’”

Many who encountered the author referred to him adoringly as Boz, his onetime pen name. And in those days, before the advent of photography, countless painters and sculptors sought to capture the visitor’s likeness in oil and stone.

Ironically, Americans held Dickens in considerably higher regard than he valued them. In a letter he wrote from Baltimore in March 1842, Dickens

made his feelings on America clear: “I don’t like the country. I wouldn’t live here, on any consideration. . . . I think it impossible, utterly impossible, for any Englishman to live here and be happy.”

His overall negative impression of America encompassed the president himself. John Tyler had inherited the office from the deceased William Henry Harrison, and when invited to a private audience in the executive mansion, Dickens found Tyler dull and uninteresting with a jaded appearance. When a dinner invitation arrived from President Tyler a few days later, Dickens declined and continued his journey.

With the exception of a handful of luminaries—among them, Washington Irving and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—Dickens’s dour and often condescending attitude toward Americans formed the foundation of his *American Notes*, published later that year. In it, he leaves no doubt that he found Americans to be unlettered, uncivil, arrogant, humorless, violent, and hypocritical.

For his trip, Dickens hired a young American, George Washington Putnam, as his secretary. Nearly thirty years later, Putnam recorded his experiences in a two-part article, “Public and Private Lives of Charles Dickens,” for the October and November 1870 issues of *The Atlantic*. His reminiscences present a much more benign version of the author’s views than does Dickens himself.

Putnam describes a typical response to the author’s presence: “A crowd of visitors thronged the house. Statesmen, authors, poets, scholars, merchants, judges, lawyers, editors came, many of them accompanied by their wives and daughters, and his rooms were filled with smiling faces and

During his visit to St. Louis in April 1842, world-renowned author and playwright Charles Dickens made it a point to visit a natural prairie outside of the city.



resounded with cheerful voices. They found the great author just what they hoped and expected he would be from his writings, and no happier greetings were ever exchanged. . . . Mr. and Mrs. Dickens . . . always highly appreciated the generosity of their American welcome.”

For his part, Dickens was less than enthralled: “If I turn into the street, I am followed by a multitude. If I stay at home, the house becomes, with callers, like a fair. If I visit a public institution with

MEREDITH WILSON

only one friend, the directors come down incontinently, waylay me in the yard, and address me in a long speech. I go to a party in the evening, and am so inclosed [sic] and hemmed about with people, stand where I will, that I am exhausted from want of air. I dine out and have to talk about everything to everybody. I go to church for quiet, and there is a violent rush to the neighborhood of the pew I sit in, and the clergyman preaches at me. I take my seat in a railroad car, and the very conductor

won’t leave me alone. I get out at a station and can’t drink a glass of water without having a hundred people looking down my throat when I open my mouth to swallow.”

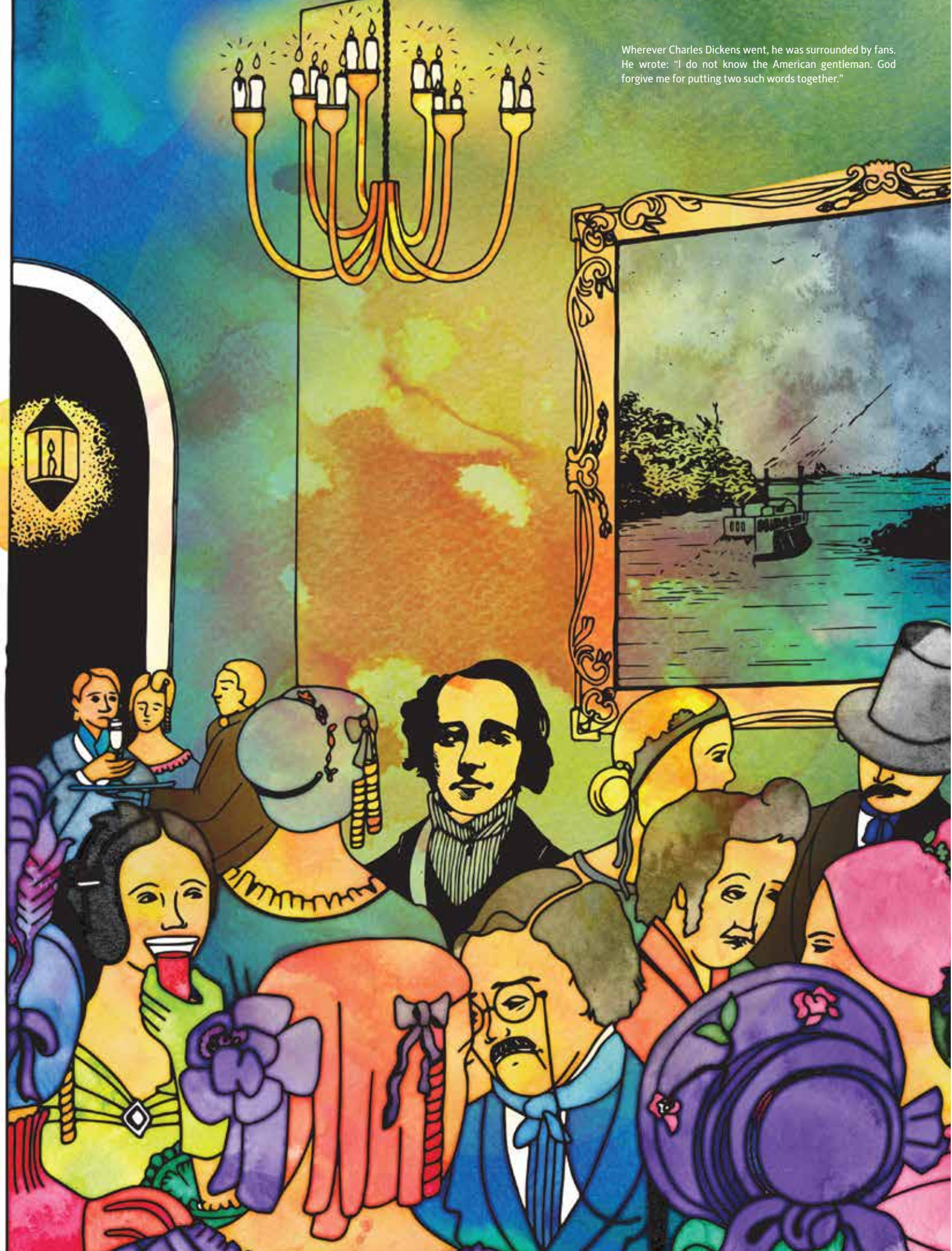
Not everything Dickens saw displeased him, though. Before St. Louis, his party stopped in Cincinnati, which he thought beautiful—“risen out of the forest like an Arabian-night city.” Characteristically, however, he found the residents disappointing. “I really think my face has acquired a

fixed expression of sadness from the constant and unmitigated boredom I endure.” And the outlying country folk fared no better: “invariably morose, sullen, clownish, and repulsive.”

After Cincinnati, Dickens traveled to St. Louis by steam up the Mississippi, which he dubbed “the beastliest river in the world.” On April 10, he wrote, “At last, there were the lights of St. Louis.”

Once landed at the wharf, he was lodged in the Planter’s House. Today, Planter’s House is a

Wherever Charles Dickens went, he was surrounded by fans. He wrote: "I do not know the American gentleman. God forgive me for putting two such words together."



MEREDITH WILSON

high-end cocktail bar on the Mississippi, but it was a hotel in Dickens's day. He described it as "an excellent house ... built like an English hospital with long passages and bare walls and skylights above the room-doors for the free circulation of air." The proprietors, he wrote, "have most bountiful notions of providing the creature comforts."

The author and his wife walked through the old French section; his description was charming. He was impressed with the "quaint and picturesque" houses lining the "narrow and crooked" thoroughfares. They strolled past "queer little barber shops, taverns, and crazy old tenements with blinking casements, such as may be seen in Flanders. Some of these ancient habitations ... have a kind of French shrug about them."

He went on to describe the recently constructed wharves, warehouses, and new buildings in all directions: "The town bids fair in a few years to improve considerably; though it is not likely ever to vie, in elegance or beauty, with Cincinnati."

He remarked on the number of Catholic churches and schools, "introduced here by the early French settlers." But he could not resist taking a jab at the city's weather. He declared himself "at issue with the inhabitants of St. Louis, in questioning the perfect salubrity of its climate, and in hinting that it must dispose to fever, in the summer and autumnal seasons. Just adding, that it is very hot, lies among great rivers, and has vast tracts of undrained swampy land around it, I leave the reader to form his own opinion."

Dickens had expressed a desire to see the prairie, so he and his party traveled some thirty miles from the city for an overnight visit to the Looking Glass Prairie, in modern-day Illinois. His description of the trip over the next few days is rife with his usual combination of good-humored barbs and scathing ridicule. On returning to St. Louis, they passed "a spot called Bloody Island, the duelling-ground [sic] of St. Louis," named for the most recent pistol fight to be staged there. "Both combatants fell dead upon the ground; and possibly some rational people may think ... that they were no great loss to the community."

The next day, April 13, Dickens "attended a soiree and ball—not a dance—given in my honor" at the Planter's House. Typically, while he wrote of the food as plentiful and palatable, he found the "society pretty rough and intolerably conceited."

Nonetheless, thus far, St. Louis—if not its en-

viron—had proved pleasant and charming to the author. This was about to change. One day, as Putnam tells it, a well-known gentleman called upon Dickens, and in the course of conversation, asked, "Mr. Dickens, how do you like our domestic institution, sir?"

Unsure of the reference, Dickens asked his guest's meaning.

"Slavery!" was the reply.

Dickens's guest was apparently unfamiliar with the author's attitude toward slavery; he abhorred it and spoke vehemently against it. Of all the faults he found in the American way of life and system of government, slavery offended him most.

"Not at all, sir! I don't like it at all, sir!" was the reply.

At this point, the guest made the mistake of pressing his point. "You probably have not seen it in its true character and are prejudiced against it."

By now, Dickens was in a fury. "I have seen it, sir! All I wish to see of it, and I detest it, sir!"

The chastened visitor mumbled "Good morning," and—looking mortified, abashed, and offended—seized his hat and hastily took his leave, whereupon Dickens fumed at Putnam, "Damn their impudence, Mr. P! If they will not thrust their accursed 'domestic institution' in my face, I will not attack it, for I did not come here for that purpose. But to tell me that a man is better off as a slave than as a freeman is an insult, and I will not endure it from any one! I will not bear it!"

The next day, Dickens described the incident in a letter to friends in England: "They won't let me alone about slavery. A certain judge in St. Louis went so far yesterday, that I fell upon him (to the indescribable horror of the man who brought him) and gave him a piece of my mind."

He went on to relate an incident that had happened in St. Louis six years earlier, in which a slave, unjustly arrested, slashed a constable with a Bowie knife. Thereupon, a mob "among whom were men of mark, wealth, and influence in the place ... carried him away to a piece of open ground beyond the city and burned him alive."

Dickens was outraged that "the deed was done in broad day" and "not a hair on the head of one of those men has been hurt to this day."

On the afternoon of April 14, Dickens and his party left St. Louis to retrace their journey north.

"We turned our faces homeward," he wrote. "Thank Heaven!"

They rode the river for a brief stopover in Cincinnati, then traveled by stagecoach to Columbus with Dickens occupying his favorite seat—on the box beside the driver. They rode coaches all the way to Buffalo and, from there, ferried across into Canada, leaving behind them an adulatory population that, sadly, was far more loving than loved. With the publication of *American Notes*, Americans would discover to their dismay the low esteem in which their literary idol, whom they had proudly welcomed to their shores, held them.

CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS, DICKENS-STYLE

Although it's been more than 150 years since Boz visited Missouri, you can still celebrate his life and work with Charles Dickens-themed events across the state.

DECEMBER 4-6

DICKENS CHRISTMAS FAIRE

Visit Neosho's Mills Park Center for a holiday craft fair in the spirit of Charles Dickens. More than fifty vendors will be selling holiday gifts. Visit neoshocc.com or call 417-451-1925 for more information.

DECEMBER 5

DICKENS CHRISTMAS

The streets of historic downtown Warrensburg will come to life in the spirit of a Dickens Christmas from 10 AM to 4 PM. The event will include carriage rides, live music in local businesses, chestnuts roasting over an open fire, and more. Visit warrensburgmainstreet.com or call 660-429-3988 to learn more.

DECEMBER 10

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

See Dickens's most revered yuletide play at Jesse Auditorium on the University of Missouri campus in Columbia. Tickets range from \$12 to \$29. Visit eventpros.missouri.edu or call 573-882-3781 for more information.

DECEMBER 11-20

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

See another performance of this Christmas classic at the Lyceum Theatre in Arrow Rock. Tickets are \$35.50. Visit lyceumtheatre.org or call 660-837-3311 for more information.

PLAYING ✂ for BLOOD

Discover the rise and fall of the original Bald Knobbers of Southwest Missouri.

A HARSH JUSTICE

The settlement of America's frontier is rife with stories of vigilantes—masked self-appointed avengers who descended on their victims brandishing whips, guns, and hanging ropes. Many such organizations started out professing the best of intentions, only to descend into violence and mayhem. Initially, the small farmers who donned masks in the Black Patch Tobacco Wars of Western Kentucky simply wanted to sell their tobacco at a fair price. And the vigilante groups of early-day San Francisco and Virginia City set out only to protect their fellow citizens from rampant criminal violence. Yet, as the membership lists grew, the objectives rapidly transmogrified into something sinister. So it was when the Bald Knobber “vigilance committee” of Taney County launched its first foray, against the notorious Taylor Brothers.

Arguably, Tubal and Frank Taylor were fitting candidates for the Bald Knobbers' brand of vigilante justice. To the residents of the Missouri Ozarks of 1884, the two were well-known criminals who roamed the region perpetrating crimes that ranged from banal to sadistic. They stole chickens, shot up the local towns, took what they wanted, beat their critics, and mutilated animals for sport. When a farmer brought an indictment against Tubal, he went into hiding. On

April 8 of the following year, Frank was indicted for trashing the Eglinton general store and threatening to kill the owner, who immediately swore out a complaint against him. Two days later, the two brothers entered the store and shot both the owner and his wife, wounding them seriously but not fatally. On April 15, Frank and Tubal were locked in Forsyth's county jail pending indictment.

At ten o'clock that evening, some seventy-five to a hundred armed men rode quietly into town and dismounted at the jail. One stepped up and smashed the lock with a few blows of a sledge hammer, and a handful of the men dragged the brothers, weeping and screaming, from their cell. They tied them on two horses and silently rode out of town. After riding two miles, the grim party halted, and a rope was thrown over the limb of a scrub oak tree. The vigilantes, silent as the boys pleaded for their lives, placed the noose ends around their necks and led away the horses. The Taylor brothers were found suspended from the oak limb the next morning, with a placard affixed to Tubal's shirt:

“Beware! These are the first victims to the wrath of outraged citizens. More will follow. The Bald Knobbers.”

—By Ron Soodalter—

**“BEWARE! THESE ARE
THE FIRST VICTIMS TO THE
WRATH OF OUTRAGED
CITIZENS. MORE WILL FOLLOW.
THE BALD KNOBBERS.”**

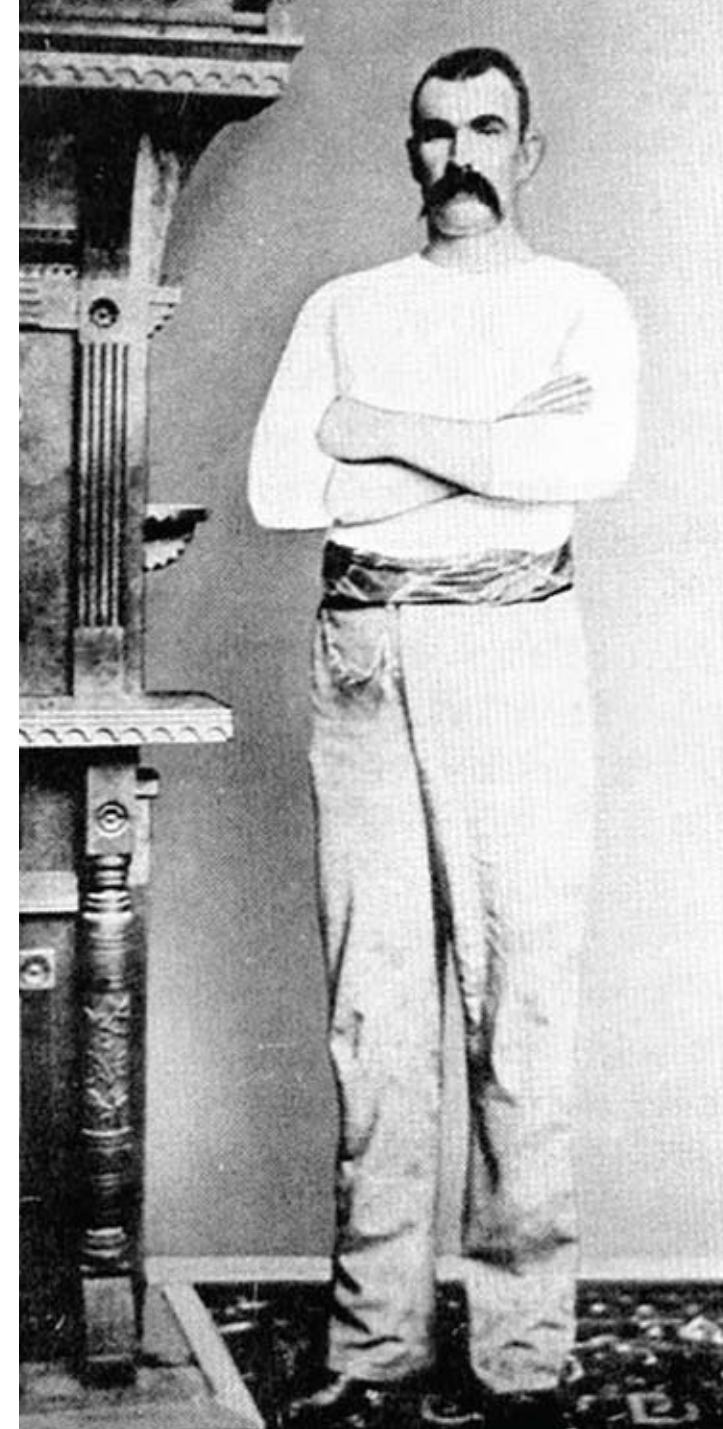
ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW BARTON



The Shepherd of the Hills—the 1919 film adaptation of Harold Bell Wright's novel of the same name—portrayed the masked Bald Knobbers in historically accurate detail.



Nathaniel N. "Nat" Kinney was the leader of the original Bald Knobbers, before other chapters were started. According to legend, he stood over six feet tall and always had two guns on his person.



FOUNDING A VIGILANCE COMMITTEE

Missouri had long been ripe for the birth of a vigilance committee. In the years before the Civil War, its citizens were divided by violently opposing political views. During the conflict, Missouri was hotly contested by pro- and anti-slavery forces and was the scene of depredations by the likes of such murderous bushwhackers as William T. "Bloody Bill" Anderson and William Clarke Quantrill on the Southern side, not to mention the fanatical John R. Kelso for the North. Both Union and Confederate detachments burned entire towns—including Forsyth, the Taney County seat. Southwest Missouri's rural economy suffered accordingly. Farms stood empty, fields fallow, as Missourians on both sides were driven from their homes and from the state.

In the years following the Southern defeat, unreconstructed rebel outlaw bands such as the James and Younger gangs sprang up across the state, plundering at will and justifying murder and mayhem in the name of the Lost Cause. In many instances, what law there was had long since proved ineffectual or strongly biased, and inevitably, the vacuum it left made room for a strong vigilante organization.

By 1885, law enforcement in Taney County consisted only of a sheriff and his two deputies. Within a short time, the county went through four sheriffs, one of whom had been shot to death. On April 5, one hundred angry men held a meeting on a treeless ridge—a "bald knob" in local parlance—near Kirbyville. It was to be the first gathering of the Bald Knobbers: an organization born of both frustration and hope for the future.

In the words of regional historian Matthew J. Hernando, "Their goals included establishing an honest and thrifty local government and making the county safe for immigration, new businesses, and investment."

Its members were committed to building a modern, progressive society in the Ozarks, "bringing to the region roads, bridges, railroads, banks, greater social stability, and opportunities for profitable business," and they proscribed as enemies the lawbreakers whom they saw as obstacles to this vision. Many of the members were Union veterans, and nearly all were Republicans. A number of them had moved here from Northern states, and they were mostly members of the middle or upper class. The rolls consisted largely of attorneys, businessmen, merchants, and politicians.

At this time, vigilantism was very much a part of American life. However, where many Southern and Western vigilance committees were created as laws unto themselves, the Bald Knobbers did not consider their new body to be extralegal. They saw themselves, observes Hernando, "as an adjunct to existing law enforcement. In their own eyes, they were acting mainly as 'militant reinforcements' to the new Republican regime."

The leader of the Bald Knobbers was a giant of a man named Nathaniel N. "Nat" Kinney. Although reports of his size varied, according to some accounts, he stood a well-proportioned six feet, seven inches tall, with broad shoulders and a sweeping black moustache. Kinney was a recent arrival in Taney County, having moved from Springfield just two

years earlier. He had a somewhat peripatetic history. Originally a native of West Virginia, he had fought for the Union, and after the war, had moved to Indiana, Colorado, and Topeka, Kansas, where he worked as a superintendent on the railroad. In 1880, he left Topeka for Springfield and eventually made his way to Taney County.

The Bald Knobbler vigilance committee was the last in a series of organizations Kinney had joined. While living in Topeka, he became an officer in both the Ancient Order of United Workmen and the Topeka Rifles, a strike-breaking local militia created by the railroad. He was also a member of the Grange and the Grand Army of the Republic, despite being an outspoken supporter of the Democratic Party. His personality matched his size, and he soon made himself noticed in and around Forsyth.

Like Kinney, many of the Bald Knobbers had come to Southwest Missouri after the war to take advantage of the cheap land. In the late 1860s, the federal government made available some three hundred thousand acres in Taney County and offered much of it to homesteaders for nominal fees. Still, despite the increased availability of affordable, arable land, Taney County remained relatively poor in comparison to its neighboring counties—a source of frustration to its more upwardly mobile citizenry, who blamed much of the county's misfortunes on rampant crime and political corruption. Their perception of the criminal situation was accurate. In 1860, just prior to the war, the inmate population of the state's prisons was 286. By 1880, the number had swelled to 2,041. Journalists at the time reported that, in the two decades following the war's end, there were upward of forty murders in Taney County alone and not a single conviction. Although this number might have been inflated, there existed an undeniable atmosphere of violence. The Bald Knobbers considered themselves the remedy for what ailed Taney County, and it would ultimately prove to be harsh medicine indeed.

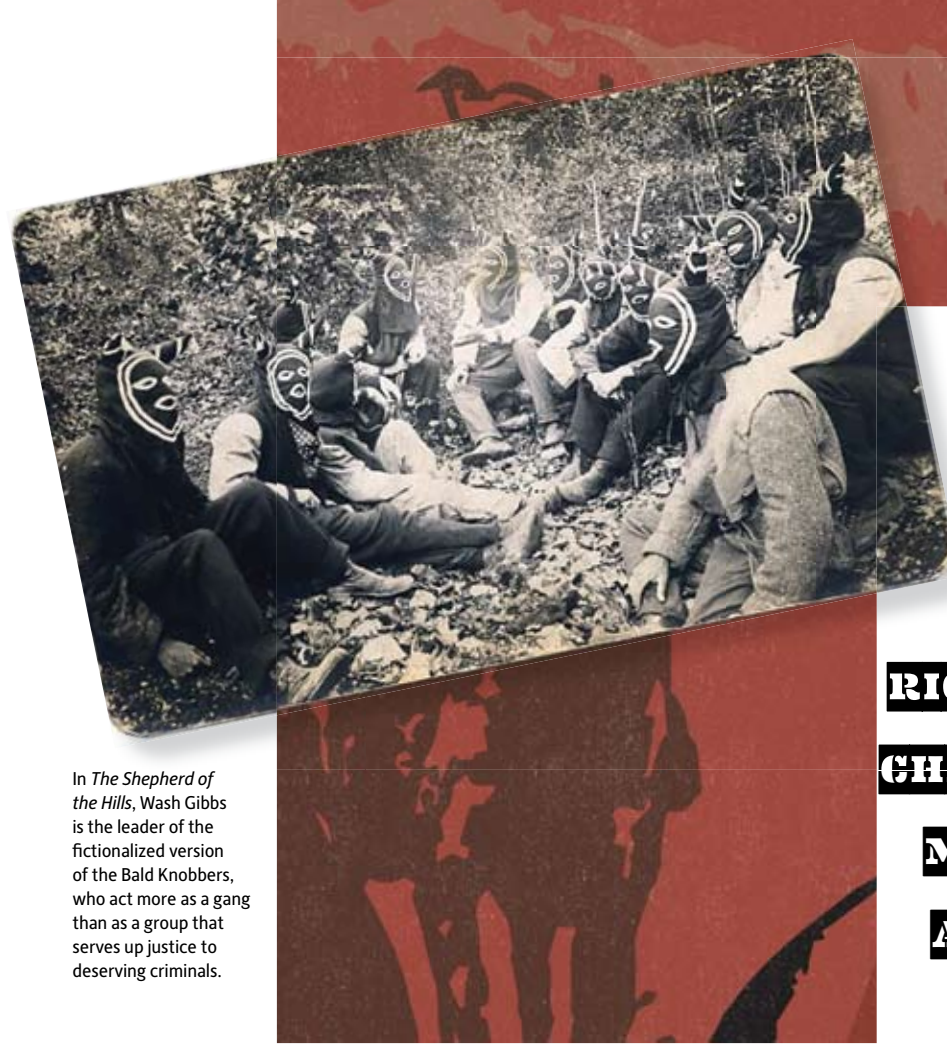
THE BALD KNOBBERS RIDE

After voting to form a "committee for law and order," the Bald Knobbers divided up into legions, each commanded by a captain. Big Nat Kinney was named chieftain of the whole organization. When they hanged the two Taylor boys less than two weeks later, the seriousness of their purpose became clear to all. And while some community members condemned the Bald Knobbers' actions, their ranks soon swelled to more than three hundred men.

Many of the members adhered to their original program of aiding law enforcement by punishing violent offenses and crimes against property, as well as preventing a return of the Democrats to power. Still, there were those in the committee's burgeoning ranks—men whom one his-

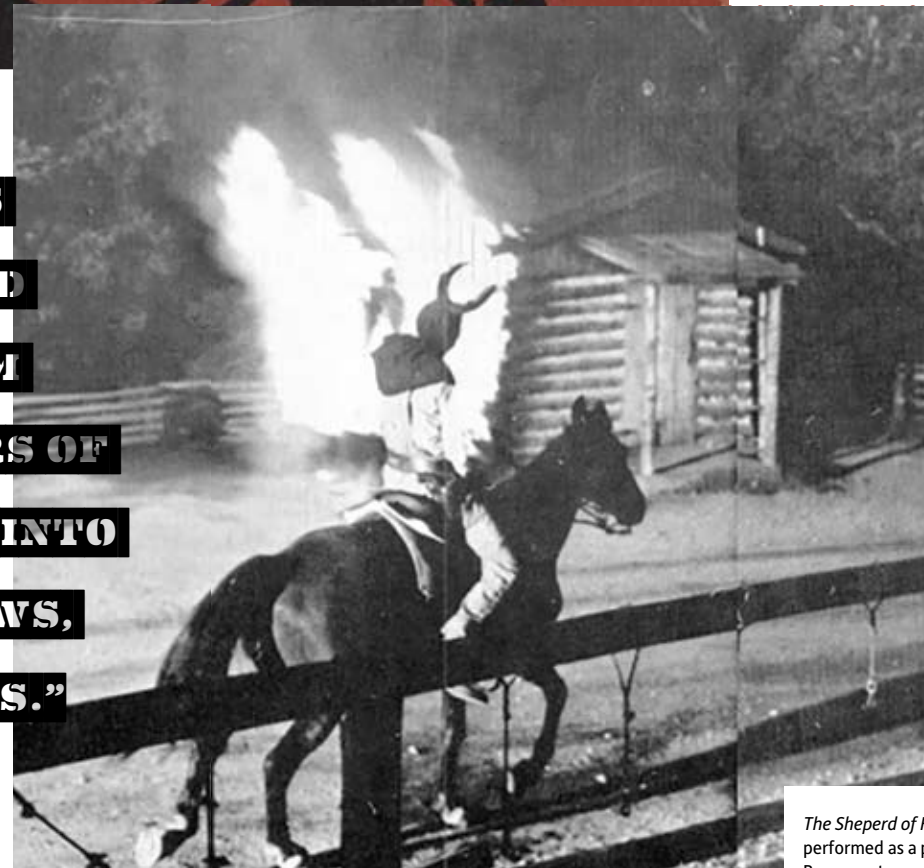
torian describes as a hard core of extremists and radicals—who allowed the violence to get out of hand. Soon, they were staging nocturnal raids not only on criminals, but also on those whom they considered undesirable. The list included gamblers, wife beaters, and homesteaders, or squatters. One old timer recalled, "It was rough. You had to walk a straight line. If a man began getting ornery with his wife, she'd let the Bald Knobbers know and they'd slip down and beat him up." And since many of the Bald Knobbers earned at least a part of their living by cutting and selling timber, those squatters who presumed to fell logs on land claimed, or simply used, by the vigilantes became targets of their wrath.

"Still others," states Hernando, "the Bald Knobbers forced out simply because they somehow had managed to anger, annoy, or inconvenience the vigilantes."



In *The Shepherd of the Hills*, Wash Gibbs is the leader of the fictionalized version of the Bald Knobbers, who act more as a gang than as a group that serves up justice to deserving criminals.

**"THE VIGILANTES
HAD TRANSFORMED
THEMSELVES FROM
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CHRISTIAN MORALITY INTO
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AND SOCIAL PARIASHS."**



The Sheperd of Hills is performed as a play in Branson at an outdoor theater. Here, they re-enact the Bald Knobbers' terror in rural southwest Missouri, setting a cabin ablaze in the night.

The night riders sometimes worked in conjunction with the courts. On one occasion, they scooped up two men who were carrying concealed weapons and deposited them in the county jail. Social position mattered little. To the Bald Knobbers' thinking, no one was so highly placed that he could not be brought down, should the situation warrant it. With questionable justification, they drove out a respected justice of the peace and raided the home of a minister and sitting judge who happened to hold a lease to property that some of the vigilantes coveted.

It is estimated that scores, and possibly hundreds, of residents and their families were warned away and driven from the county by the night riders. As the violence escalated, a contingent began to form in opposition to the Bald Knobbers. In February 1886, Nat Kinney himself shot and killed a young man with whom he had been carrying on a personal feud. Although he was exonerated, many felt that he had gotten away with murder. It was exactly the sort of situation the Bald Knobbers had been created to stop.

With this killing, the Anti-Bald Knobber faction solidified as a cohesive body, intent on stopping the violence. The differences between the two groups were palpable. Where the Bald Knobbers were overwhelmingly pro-Union men and Republicans, their opponents were almost all Southern-born Democrats with long-standing Rebel sympathies. They were also mostly farmers who were steeped in and committed to the traditional rural and agricultural values of the Ozarks.

The Anti-Bald Knobbers petitioned the governor to allow them to form a home militia, in order to counter the acts of their adversaries. They requested weapons with which to combat the vigilantes; the governor refused. Instead, he sent his adjutant general, J.C. Jamison, who gave the Bald Knobbers two choices: disband immediately or face a state militia. The vigilantes chose the path of moderation, and on April 10, 1886, the Bald Knobbers of Taney County officially disbanded—at least on paper.

Most of the members left off their vigilante activities, turning instead to a more conventional path. They saw to it that the local political offices were filled with ex-Bald Knobbers and proceeded to use the courts to prosecute offenders, most of whom were Democrats and members of the Anti-Bald Knobber faction. And prosecute they did, often to the point of persecution. The most trivial offenses, such as the seining of fish and hunting without a license, were flagged, and the offenders fined or jailed. Former night riders were now using their own political machine to harass their adversaries and maintain control of the community.

A small number of Bald Knobbers under Nat Kinney had refused to heed the adjutant general's call to disband. They continued to meet and to ride down on their neighbors. Meanwhile, natives of nearby Christian and Douglas counties formed their own iterations of the vigilance committees. Although they were made up of the same class of citizens who had opposed the Taney County vigilantes, they chose to borrow the Bald

Knobber name, perhaps because Nat Kinney himself served as their "advisor" in adapting the structure of the original band.

However, that was where the similarity ended. Where the original Taney County members had been professional men, the Bald Knobbers of Christian and Douglas counties were mostly farmers. They were poorer, more religiously driven, and quicker to use violence in their efforts to drive out the unwanted and the unrighteous. They instituted whippings and worse to drive their message home. They maintained a narrow moral agenda and set out to ensure that it was adhered to, with torture and death held out as the penalties for transgressors. According to one judge who presided over a subsequent murder trial, they "thought that they had a right to go out and make humanity do right according to their notions of right."

The new Bald Knobbers differed from the original chapter in another, more dramatic way. The Taney County Bald Knobbers—who believed, at least initially, that they were acting on behalf of law enforcement—saw no need to disguise themselves. The newly-formed so-called Bald Knobbers of Christian and Douglas counties distinguished themselves by the wearing of masks—and they were terrifying; made of black cambric or calico, with the eyes and mouth cut out and outlined in white and a pair of rigid horns protruding from the top, they covered the entire head. The sight of dozens of

mounted men carrying torches and wearing these ghoulish masks was chilling to behold.

Some of their victims were guilty of nothing more egregious than being public nuisances, or simply criticizing the vigilantes. Saloon keepers and gamblers were primary targets, as the vigilantes set about destroying various dens of iniquity. As the movement spread across Missouri, Knobbers turned their attention to discouraging new homesteaders. They burned down houses, barns, and other structures; whipped, beat, and shot the settlers; and conducted a general reign of terror.

'THE FINAL STRAW

On the night of March 11, 1887, they went too far. Fortified on local whiskey, a mob of twenty-five to thirty members of the Christian County chapter broke into a cabin where two families—the Edenses and the Greenes—were staying. The sleeping inhabitants included an infant, its sick mother, and two young children. One of the Edens clan had spoken disparagingly about the vigilantes, and they were bent on retribution. Without hesitation, they smashed down the door with an axe, shot two men to death in front of their families, grievously wounded a third, and blew a finger off the hand of one of the women when she deflected a gun barrel aimed at her head. As chronicler Hernandez put it, within a few moments' time, "the vigilantes had transformed themselves from righteous defenders of ... Christian morality into murderers, outlaws, and social pariahs."

The legal floodgates opened. Some eighty men were indicted, twenty-five for the Edens-Greene outrage alone. Several men received fines, others were sentenced to prison terms, and four of the murderers were condemned to die. One escaped; the other three, including their chieftain, were hanged.

There was still the odd outbreak of violence. In August 1888, after several unsuccessful attempts, the Anti-Bald Knobbers succeeded in assassinating Nat Kinney in retribution for the man he had slain years earlier. But for all intents and purposes, the Bald Knobber vigilante movement was dead. Begun as an earnest attempt to right wrongs and improve the community, it had transplanted and degenerated into a bastion for masked thugs, bigots, and bullies and was best left as an artifact of Missouri's wilder frontier past.

From Left, Senator Harry S. Truman, Thomas J. Pendergast, James P. Aylward, James Farley, N. G. Robertson, and David Fitzgerald attend the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on June 24, 1936.

“THE SENATOR *from* PENDERGAST”:

Harry Truman, “Boss Tom,” and the Pendergast Machine

BY RON SOODALTER

It is perhaps impossible to attain public office without incurring at least some political debts. Even when played cleanly, the game of politics requires a give-and-take that frequently places office-holders in positions that are at best uncomfortable and at worst compromising. Our chief executives are not even immune. From the time of Washington’s inauguration, presidents entered office in debt to their supporters, and Harry Truman, the only Missourian to be elected president, was no exception.

From the moment he decided to seek public office, Truman was closely linked with the most influential and corrupt political boss in Missouri. Throughout his career, his name was joined with that of the notorious Tom Pendergast, right up to the moment Truman took the oath of office as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s vice president.

Many voters of the 1930s and 1940s and historians ever since have asked the question, “How can a man lay claim to honesty and diligence while owing his very career to a man who used the law as a mere tool for self-aggrandizement?”

A farmer, bank clerk, and failed businessman, the unostentatious Truman appealed to voters as the embodiment of the common man. He was admired for his plain speaking, which at times dangerously skirted character defamation. He once referred to Adlai Stevenson as “no better than a regular sissy” and called Richard Nixon a “no-good, lying bastard” who could “lie out of both sides of his mouth at the same time.”

Meanwhile, no one—least of all Truman himself—questioned that Truman owed his political career to the man who strong-armed voters, rigged elections, formed alliances with organized crime, ran the largest protection racket in Missouri, and virtually owned Kansas City and Jackson County. For decades, Tom Pendergast controlled the Kansas City police force and dictated how regional business and government would be conducted.

“Boss Tom”

Large and beefy with a bulldog countenance, Thomas J. Pendergast was a daunting figure. He was born in St. Joseph in July of 1872, the ninth and last child of a poor immigrant couple

from County Tipperary, Ireland. Although he later claimed to have attended college for two years, no evidence exists to indicate that he went to school beyond the sixth grade.

Few promising occupations were open to a young Irishman in nineteenth-century America, so Tom initially worked as a laborer, grocery wagon driver, and clerk. At twenty-two, he relocated to Kansas City to work as a bookkeeper for his older brother James, a successful businessman, saloonkeeper, and local politician. Two years before Tom’s arrival, James had been elected alderman of the working-class First Ward, and he used his position both to improve the lives of his constituents and to enhance his own personal fortunes.

The spoils system was alive and more than healthy throughout American politics at this time, and it was nowhere more faithfully practiced than in Kansas City. Before the advent of James Pendergast and others of his ilk, jobs had formerly gone to white American Protestants from established families. Now, they were being made available to Catholics, people of color, and immigrants. In exchange, political movers and shakers such as Pendergast benefited financially from their constituents in the form of bribes,

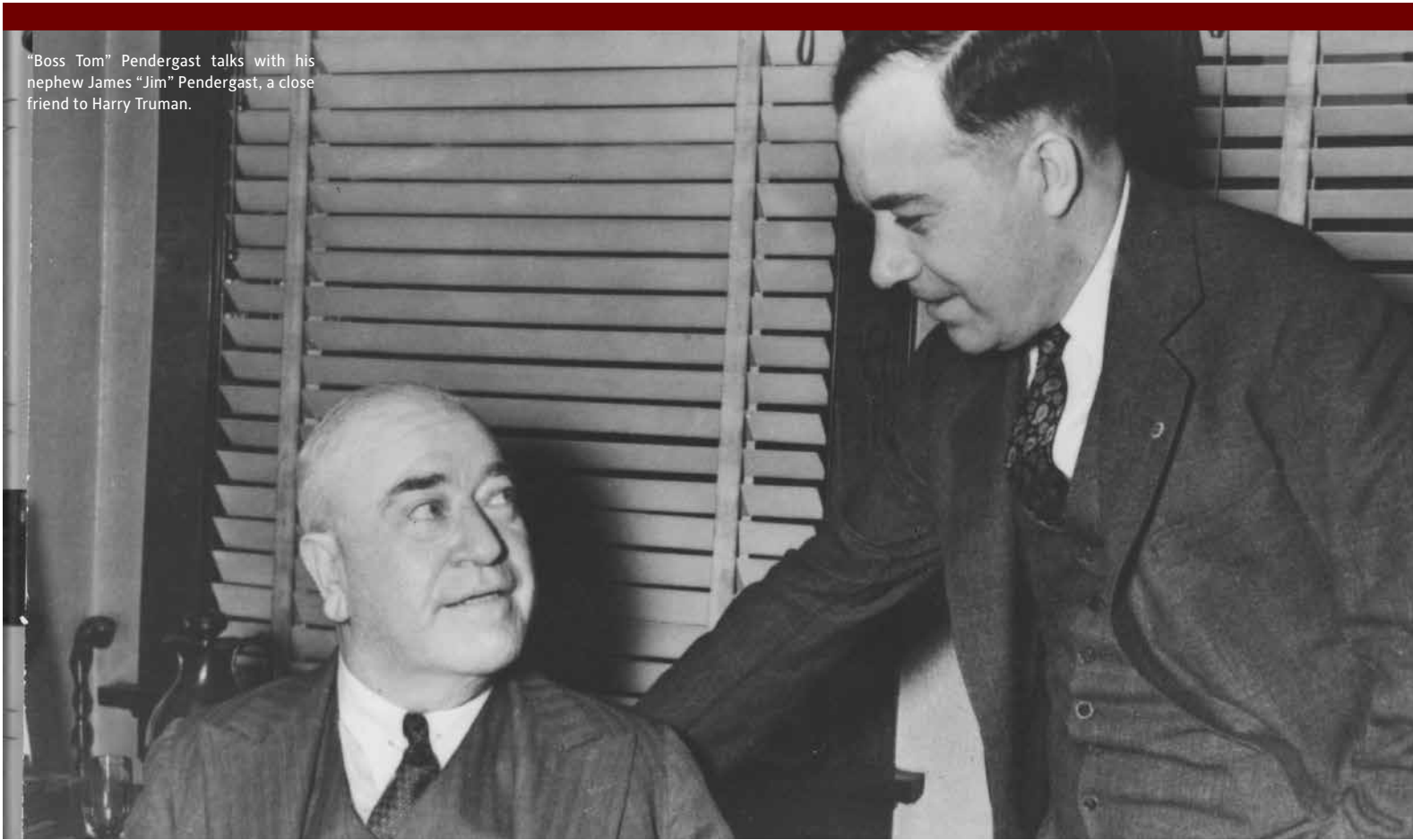
kickbacks, and favors. The standard quid-pro-quo system benefited all involved and allowed many—who otherwise would not have had the opportunity—to advance. It was less about qualifications and more about connections, and James was a deft practitioner of the system. As the owner of a major saloon, he also oversaw and protected gambling, drugs, and prostitution in his district.

Shortly after Tom’s arrival in 1894, James secured him an appointment as deputy constable of the First Ward City Court. Young Tom learned Democratic politics at his brother’s elbow, and he was a quick study. By 1896, he was appointed deputy marshal for the county court and, four years later, superintendent of streets. The latter position was by mayoral appointment, a by-product of Mayor James A. Reed’s friendship with James Pendergast.

Apparently, James was not a healthy man, and when he began to flag, Tom stepped in to oversee his brother’s duties as alderman. When James died in 1911, Tom ran for his city council seat and won. Four years later, Tom resigned his position and, over the next ten years, proceeded to build the most powerful political machine in the city.

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"Boss Tom" Pendergast talks with his nephew James "Jim" Pendergast, a close friend to Harry Truman.



Tom had learned many valuable lessons from James, but none were more important than the need to take care of his constituents. During the Great Depression, Tom provided food, clothing, and fuel to countless people in and around Kansas City and sponsored Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners for residents of the First Ward. Largely due to his efforts, Kansas City enjoyed what came to be called "Pendergast Prosperity" and was spared much of the desperation America endured during the Depression.

The people responded by voting for "Boss Tom's" candidates, while the various projects he supported were often brought to fruition by his own construction companies. Meanwhile, Prohibition was still in full swing, and Tom ensured that vice flourished while he reaped substantial payoffs from the owners of brothels, speak-easies, and nightclubs.

To ensure the growth of his machine, Tom also courted the white-collar middle class through a program of favors and special events, social and sports clubs, picnics and dances. In fact, he was so deft at consolidating power that the governor's mansion came to be referred to colloquially as "Uncle Tom's Cabin." His organization grew so powerful that, by the early 1930s, Pendergast was in control of the city, the county, and—for at least a time—the state legislature in Jefferson City.

Beginnings

The Truman-Pendergast relationship began around the turn of the century, shortly after Truman graduated from high school. His parents had lost their land and moved to Kansas City, directly across the street from Mike Pendergast—another of Tom's older brothers and a small-time politician in his own right. Mike became good friends with Truman's father, John A. Truman, and the friendship passed along to their sons. When the United States entered World War I, young Harry served in the same regiment as Mike's son James—Jim for short—and the two formed a bond that lasted their lives long.

After the war, in 1922, Harry Truman was unsuccessfully running a men's clothing store when Mike and Jim asked him to stand for the western judge position of the Jackson County Administrative Court. The name was something of a misnomer; it was not a judicial court but rather the combined executive and legislative arms of the Jackson County government. Thanks in part to the financial backing of Jim's uncle Tom Pendergast's machine, Truman was elected to a two-year term. Although he lost the election in 1924, he was elected presiding judge in 1926 and again four years later, largely through the money, influence, and vote-rigging of Tom Pendergast.

Clearly, Truman owed his budding political career to Tom Pendergast—in fact to three Pendergasts. Yet, it proved a

"There are few who have not fallen into line. ... All of we heads of departments are strong for and working daily for Mr. Truman."—
Governor Guy B. Park

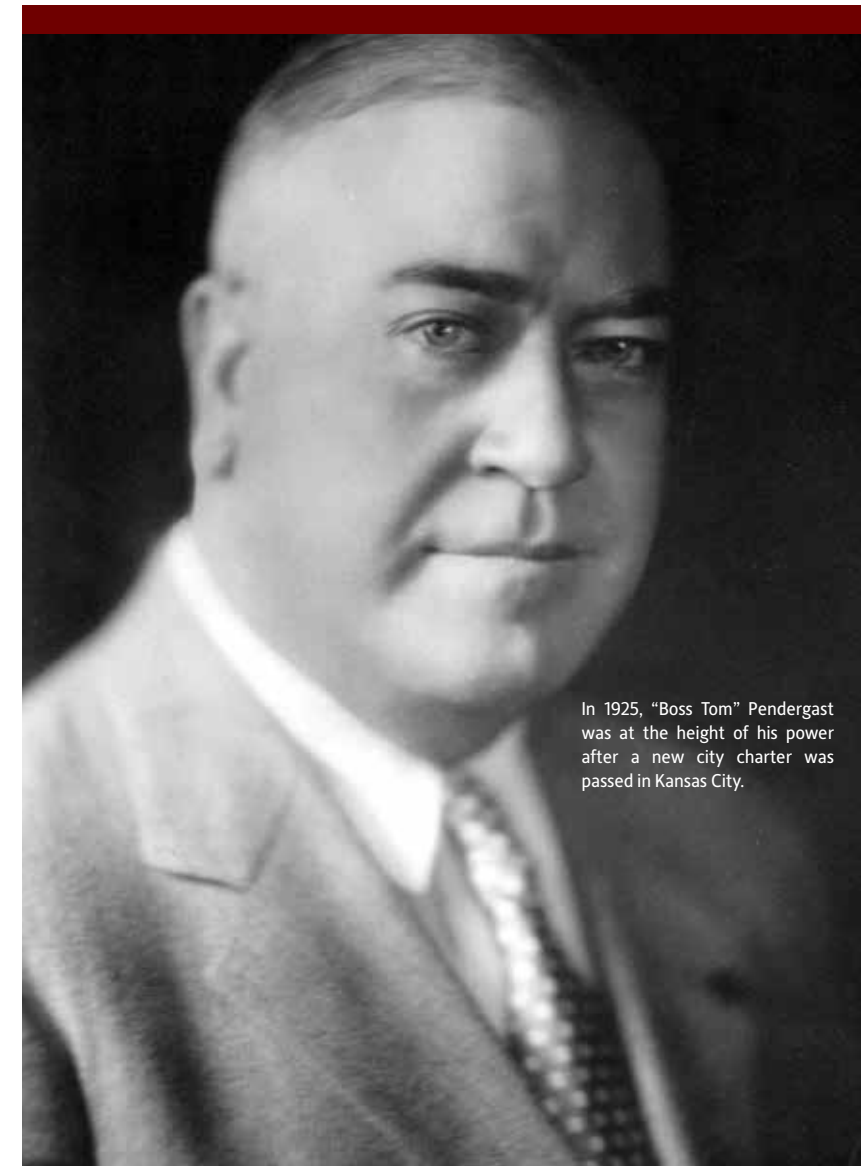
mutually beneficial arrangement. For his part, Truman gave "Boss Tom" what Kansas City historian William Worley refers to as a "fig leaf of legitimacy." Truman had a number of qualities that made him an ideal face of the organization. For one thing, he was not a slick, big-city politician. Voters and constituents responded to his everyman way of addressing them. In addition, he had served during the recent war, belonged to the American Legion, and was a devout Baptist. By stopping the payoffs and kickbacks rampant in the court, he soon developed a strong reputation for honesty, too. At one juncture, Truman openly invited a grand jury investigation, stating, "I am proud of the record of the county court."

Tom Pendergast benefited from basking in his light, despite the fact that Truman continually cost him money. No longer were Tom's companies, or those of his supporters, the automatic choice for construction projects. Truman ensured that only the lowest bidders won the contracts, and he refused to be bribed or to countenance graft within the court. Truman came across as so incorruptible that he was actually known as a reformer.

However, the reality was far less clear-cut. Despite cleaning up the county court, Truman was a strong believer in the spoils system. He drew his own line between blatant corruption and favoritism, which he perceived as totally separate issues.

As chronicler Lyle W. Dorsett stated, "Truman [gave] the machine charge of the court's patronage. He saw nothing wrong with that because he believed that the victors deserved the spoils."

To Truman's thinking, it was all part of the political game. He considered it appropriate to reward the right supporter with the right position—generally in the Roads Department, the county government's biggest employer. And although he did so openly, without subterfuge or apology, he walked a fine—and somewhat invisible—line. Truman was, in the strictest sense, a willing functionary of Pendergast's machine, kicking back jobs in return for the support that had placed him in office.



In 1925, "Boss Tom" Pendergast was at the height of his power after a new city charter was passed in Kansas City.

In 1934, Tom Pendergast put forth Truman's name as the next senator from the state of Missouri. Ironically, Truman was The Boss's third choice; the first two, chosen out of political patronage, refused to run for various reasons. But having finally picked Truman, Pendergast swung into action. The Boss had been instrumental in the election of the current Missouri governor, Guy B. Park, and he now called in his marker. The governor put state employees throughout Missouri to work on Truman's behalf. The governor wrote, "The Grain Department and Police Department are thoroughly organized, and there are few who have not fallen into line. ... All of we heads of departments are strong for and working daily for Mr. Truman." Again, through Pendergast's influence and the power of his machine, Truman won election, this time in a four-way race for the US Senate.

Once in Washington, Truman held fast to his belief in the patronage system. As he saw it, he owed a debt to Tom Pendergast and his political machine, and within the confines of both the law and good judgment, he continued to repay it. When, for example, the freshman senator was approached



In Independence, upon Truman's arrival from Washington, D.C., childhood friend James "Jim" Pendergast has the ear of the President.

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by Missourians seeking employment in the federal government's new relief programs, he would always confer first with Tom Pendergast.

The benefit to "Boss Tom" was enormous. Thanks in part to his well-placed new senator, he controlled the federal work relief effort in Missouri and profited hugely, both in political and financial matters. If he hadn't been so before, he was now the most powerful man in the state, thanks in large part to Harry Truman.

However, not all of Truman's senatorial colleagues shared Truman's views on the patronage system. During his first term, Truman was viewed askance by several of his fellow senators, as well as by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was widely known that the new senator had gained office, at least in part, through the machinations of "Boss Tom." No less a political scoundrel, Louisiana's demagogic senator Huey Long publicly mocked Truman for his connections. Following the tradition that new senators give a speech to the assembled body, Truman gave his address, whereupon Senator Long stood and loudly welcomed "the Senator from Pendergast" to the US Senate.

For his part, Truman was far from naïve. After serving in public office for several years, he was a seasoned politician and well-versed in the art of self-preservation. By the time of Truman's second senatorial campaign, Tom Pendergast had fallen from power, and it behooved the candidate to distance himself politically from his friend and former sponsor. On his own, and without the support of the now-defunct machine, Truman won re-election by a mere eight thousand votes.

Endings

"Boss Tom's" political empire came crashing down in 1939. He had taken a bribe of hundreds of thousands of dollars, which he had understandably neglected to declare. Governor Lloyd C. Stark, a politician whose career had ironically been forged by Tom Pendergast, launched an investigation. Charged with tax evasion, Tom entered a guilty plea and was sentenced to fifteen months in prison and five years probation. His political influence dissipated virtually overnight. Upon his release, the ill and aging boss retired to his home in Kansas City, where he lived quietly until his death in 1945.

Meanwhile, Truman was tapped to serve as Franklin D. Roosevelt's vice president. Again, he was the third choice—a compromise candidate strongly recommended by Democratic National Chairman Robert E. Hannegan, who happened to be from St. Louis.

"Boss Tom" died just two days after Truman took the oath of office of vice president of the United States, and Truman attended the funeral. He was much criticized for it. Yet, visibly unconcerned with either Washington pundits or wagging tongues, Vice President Harry S. Truman paid a final obeisance to the man whose influence had paved the way for his ascendancy. By fair means and foul, Tom Pendergast had created and supported the public Harry Truman, and Truman was well aware that this often involved the buying or coercing of votes. For his part, Truman had repaid his mentor whenever possible—and in accordance with his own code of ethics.



The Portrait of the Political Boss as a Young Man: this photo of Tom Pendergast dates back to 1900.

Harry Truman's childhood friend Jim Pendergast and his family attended the Inaugural Gala on January 19, 1949.



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