

**Napier Shelton.** *Natural Missouri: Working With the Land.* Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2005. xii + 262 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8262-1582-6.



**Reviewed by** Chris Vancil

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Napier Shelton uses the knowledge and skill he has accumulated as an editor for the National Park Service to describe in detail some of his favorite places in Missouri. Shelton, who traces his heritage to pre-Civil War Missouri, is enamored with the physical landscape of Missouri and has a deep admiration for the people who dedicate their careers to maintaining the state's physical landscape. Through interviews with park workers, naturalists and their fellow Missourians, as well as personal observations, Shelton describes the physical environment of Missouri, the people who work with it and some intricate processes of shaping Missouri's landscape in an attempt to increase reader appreciation for the practice of land management as much as for the land itself. The people who work to shape and preserve the physical landscape of Missouri occupy a special place in Shelton's narrative and he describes them as dedicated professionals who, with personal and financial sacrifice, attempted to not only manage the physical landscape but also balance the needs and desires of local communities.

In each chapter the reader accompanies Shelton as he travels through Missouri, stopping in specific places to study the physical environment and talk with those who dedicate themselves to shaping or preserving Missouri's landscape. Shelton made fourteen stops for various purposes during his journey through Missouri. For example: Prairie State Park, where he admired native grasses and prairie chickens; at the homes of Glenn Chambers and Joel Vance, where he discussed how they used their various talents to educate the public about nature generally and Missouri specifically; and at the Ted Shanks Conversation Area, where Shelton marveled at the plethora of birds and other inhabitants. Each chapter includes a detailed description of individual areas in a way that makes the reader visualize the region and identify with it, as if they have known the place as long as Shelton.

A binding theme of most chapters is tension, either between the physical environment of Missouri and those who shape and/or preserve it or between various factions vying for control over the area. For example, Shelton described a strug-

gle at Wilson Creek National Battlefield where Gary Sullivan, the local park manager, worked tirelessly to restore the area to its Civil War era prairie. Sullivan's primary weapon in the battle against unwanted grass species was burning, a technique which Shelton describes in detail in chapters throughout the text, and which he admires for the depth of knowledge and skill required for a successfully controlled burn. Sullivan recognized that restoring a prairie was an ongoing and lengthy battle which may take 25 to 50 years to complete (pp. 33-41). Tensions between private interests also emerge. Dave Mackey created his own wildlife area where he, his family and friends hunt. Mackey recounted the struggle he encountered in keeping unwelcome hunters from using his property, some of whom were fined for illegal hunting.

Though Shelton's writing style brings the fields of Missouri alive, *Natural Missouri* is not without some significant flaws, the first of which is a lack of analysis. At several junctures *Natural Missouri* cries out for Shelton to use his deep knowledge and passion to articulate some significant conclusions about land management. For example, in "Protecting Ste. Genevieve," Shelton recounts the battle to preserve Missouri's oldest settlement site from the floods of the Mississippi River. While he describes the process by which protective works were constructed and financed he fails to place that struggle within a larger historical framework of flood control and natural resource development, only mentioning that eventually Ste. Genevieve will probably give way to the Mississippi River (p. 170). Except for a brief mention in the Preface of how he defines "natural," Shelton also misses an opportunity to enter into the historiographical debate over definitions of nature, sustainability and human influences on physical environments. The purpose of Shelton's work, however, was not to provide a traditional history or articulate a ground breaking thesis in the field of environmental history. Instead, Shelton wants the reader to love Missouri as much as

he and have as much appreciation for its managers, writers, and photographers as he does. His style and use of personal anecdotes combined with a recounting of conversations served his purpose admirably.

Shelton's latest work has something for everyone. *Natural Missouri* would be useful in an environmental history survey course by demonstrating the ways in which environmental policy is applied at local levels. It also demonstrates the deep passion and commitment with which people approach environmental management and the physical environment of Missouri. For the more casual reader, it provides a valuable introduction to the concept of land management, especially burning, even though readers will have to look elsewhere for an in-depth analysis of the issues. For those unlucky enough to never witness the natural beauty of the Show Me state, here is a chance to glimpse its beauty through the eyes of someone who sees it with wit and passion.

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