

PULL OVER

MISSOURI'S HISTORIC
ROADSIDE PARKS
ARE DWINDLING.
CATCH THEIR VIEWS
BEFORE THEY VANISH.

Those of us who remember traveling across Missouri before the interstate highway system streamlined the drive no doubt recall pulling over at a roadside park for a rest and maybe even a picnic. Food options were scarce in those days, and many travelers packed their own, feasting on cold fried chicken, potato salad, and homemade bread, pies, and cakes. At least, that's what I remember as a boy in the '60s. When my family hit the road, Mom always packed a picnic with plenty of the above. ...→

ESSAY *Greg Wood* | PHOTOS *Notley Hawkins*



Looking over the Fourche a du Clos Valley, the park on Highway 61 in Ste. Genevieve County was built in 1936 for only \$2,300. The original rustic-style log fences were removed recently, but there's still a stone oven, a stone wall, and several picnic tables available.



Visitors are treated to a beautiful view of the Mississippi River floodplain from the roadside park at the DuPont Reservation Conservation Area in Pike County. The park is tucked against the Little Dixie National Scenic Byway (Route 79), which runs through the middle of the conservation area.



PAGES 36-37: A wall made of stone arches separates the roadside park at Courtois Creek from Route 8 in Crawford County. Travelers can hang out at the fire pits, ovens, benches, and picnic tables. It's one of the 10 roadside parks built in 1936 as part of the New Deal program.

LEFT: The Dr. J. L. Gentry Roadside Park is located below the road, so kids and pets often swim in the natural rock outcroppings. The splash zones and small creek come from a natural waterfall. The park is located on Route 5 in Douglas County.

I started thinking about roadside parks because I see them on my travels across Missouri on what many would now call "backroads." I had the impression that these icons were still around, and we were seeing less of them simply because they're more often located on the roads less traveled. But these roadside stops are, in fact, disappearing.

After some investigating, I found Karen Daniels, senior historic preservation specialist for the Missouri Department of Transportation. She's the expert on the state's roadside parks.

Karen explains there is no plan to save the parks. "In fact, they have become places for illegal dumping, and the department doesn't want to spend available resources to keep them open," she says.

In the 1920s, the Missouri State Highway Department (the old name for the Missouri Department of Transportation, or MoDOT) began a program to beautify Missouri. The department worked with local garden clubs, chambers of commerce, and other organizations to plant and nurture native species, open up scenic

views, and take down signage and other visual pollution. “In one year, more than 200,000 daffodil bulbs were planted along Missouri highways,” Karen says.

As a continuation of the project, roadside parks began popping up in the 1930s. The first was the Mahan Roadside Park, built in 1932 on Route 19, south of Eminence. The Mahan park featured a stone oven, a stone arrow pointing due north, an elevation marker, picnic tables, and trash barrels. “These features were common in the parks built during the Depression era,” she says. Most of the early parks were placed at scenic overlooks, so visitors could take a load off and gaze at the view.

Soon, New Deal programs meant more funds and labor available for park construction. “In 1936, work was underway or complete on 10 roadside parks including the Frene Valley in Gasconade County, Tip Top in Iron County, Fourche a du Clos in Ste. Genevieve County, and Stillhouse Hollow in Wayne County,” Karen says.

Until about 1950, all of the roadside parks were south of the Missouri River, mostly in the Ozarks. By then, the highway department launched a formal policy. Many gardening clubs acquired Blue Star

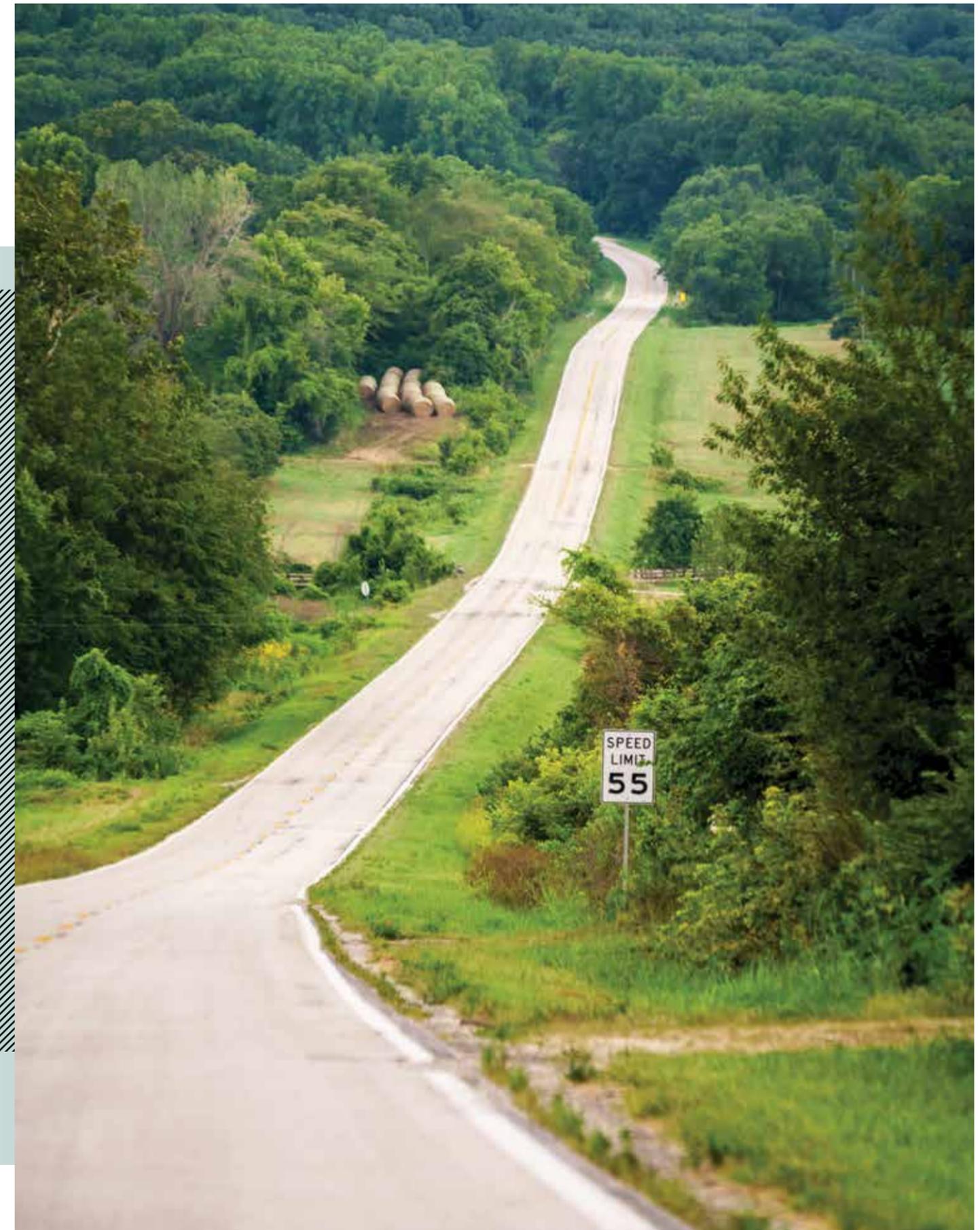
The picnic area at the Gasconade Ridge park makes for a perfect afternoon rest. To the north of the park lies the Missouri River Valley, and the Gasconade River wraps around the northeastern and southern areas.

A sign at the Gasconade Ridge Roadside Park on Highway 50 denotes a wildflower area. The flowers at the Osage County park are now wild, but more than 200,000 daffodil bulbs were planted across the state in one year when the parks were first built.



ABOVE: Wildflowers have taken over the Gasconade Ridge park. Local gardening clubs used to partner with the highway department to landscape the parks.

RIGHT: Many of the parks are found on two-lane highways, such as the Little Dixie National Scenic Byway (Route 79).





LEFT: Families can gather at Maude Hall Jones Roadside Park on Highway 63 in Boone County, where there's a monument for mothers.

RIGHT: Like many roadside parks in Missouri, Victors Point on Route 79 in Pike County offers spots to sit, eat, and enjoy the stunning views.



Memorial Markers at the parks, and some parks were commemorated with markers from The State Historical Society of Missouri. By 1960, the number had peaked at 102. Today, there are only 32 parks remaining.

There are many reasons why the number has dwindled. "Because of their location adjacent to highways, roadside parks would be absorbed into the highway as it expanded," Karen explains. "This happened to several original Route 66 roadside parks. Others were closed when neighbors complained about late-night, noisy parties. Still others were closed due to illegal dumping, which MoDOT had to clean up, taking vital funds away from highway maintenance." Others have been adopted into local, state, or national park systems.

So how do we save these iconic pieces of Americana? Karen says it simply: "The only way we are going to save them is for people to use them. The more they use them, the more it will discourage illegal dumping."

Maybe we should all slow down a bit, take the backroads more often, and stop at a historic roadside park. All 32 are marked with an icon on Missouri's official maps issued by MoDOT, which are available at most Missouri rest stops and visitor centers along the interstate highways.

On your next adventure, consider pulling over at one of these parks. Enjoy the view.

The park at Stillhouse Hollow on Route 34 in Wayne County was built in 1936 to overlook the hollows. At the time it was built, it was one of the most expensive parks, costing \$3,100. It's outfitted with picnic tables and a stone oven.