

THE CAROLINA PARAKEET IN PIONEER MISSOURI¹

BY DANIEL MC KINLEY

THE colorful Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) was among the many species of birds found by early travelers in Missouri. These screeching, sociable birds, the individuals almost waggish in their demeanor, the flocks resplendent in their gay feathers, brightened many a man's day. As with the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), this species is now only a part of history. Except for a few museum specimens, the only records remaining of these delightful birds are in the vigorous prose of numerous diaries kept by people who saw them.

Widmann (1907:113–116) wrote a good account of the parakeet in Missouri. I have summarized his findings in each region of the state, for his important work is no longer freely available. Otherwise, all reports have been arranged chronologically for each region of the state. Records for marginal counties of states bordering Missouri have been included, to make the picture as complete as possible.

French explorers recorded the earliest observations on parakeets in the Missouri area, but some of their reports are too general to be precisely placed; others apply to the bird in a general way in all its range. Many such interesting reports, besides the ones I have used, may be consulted in Wright's valuable historical review (1912).

Two general comments by early geographers are interesting, for they indicate something of the attention parakeets had from hardheaded pioneers and something of the status of the parakeets in the lore of the day. Alphonso Wetmore (1837:30–31) wrote in the 1830's: "The paroquet found in Missouri deserves notice, as peculiar in character and attractive in its plumage. This is a bird strongly resembling the green parrot in colour and form; and it is reported of them, that at night they repose within the cavity of a hollow tree, hanging by their curved Roman nose-beaks. This report may require confirmation." Just previous to Wetmore, Schoolcraft, in a list of Missouri birds, wrote (1819:37): "The *parakeet* is a beautiful bird; it is a kind of parrot; its colours are green, yellow, and red, all bright colours, and it is a pleasing sight to see a flock of them suddenly wheel in the atmosphere, and light upon a tree; their gaudy colours are reflected in the sun with the brilliance of the rainbow: they are a noisy bird, but their notes are disagreeable." It is not clear to what extent Schoolcraft based his description upon personal observations or information collected in Missouri, for the only place on his 1818–1819 trip that he specifically mentioned seeing the birds was on the Mississippi River, above Brazeau ("Obrazo") Creek, July 16, 1818: "We frequently meet the paroquet on the banks of the river, and have passed

¹Contribution from The Missouri Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, Columbia.

several large flocks to-day. This is a kind of parrot, a beautiful bird, which is very common in Louisiana, Missouri, and Kentucky" (*ibid.*:232).

MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

Some of the early Mississippi Valley observations summarized here undoubtedly were meant to apply to either or both banks of the river. In July, 1673, Joliet wrote (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 58:99) that near the mouth of the Illinois River, "Parroquets fly in flocks of 10 to 12." And the same summer, above the mouth of the St. Francis River (Tennessee side?), he remarked: "We killed a little parroquet, one half of whose head was red, The other half and The neck yellow, and The whole body green" (*ibid.*, 59:149-151). Charlevoix thought the parakeets he saw on the Illinois River (north-central Illinois) in September, 1721, only stragglers at that time of year, although he stated that on the Mississippi they were found at all seasons (Charlevoix, 1923, 2:189-190). That this was true, at least for the winter as far north as Quincy, Illinois (opposite Marion-Lewis county line, Missouri), is suggested by a trader's reminiscences of 1800-01: "The long Winter, from November until Spring, had to be worn out; and I did my share of rambling with my gun, shooting paroquets, picking and eating pecans, and breaking through the ice with narrow escapes" (Anderson, 1882:149). From nearby Pike County, Illinois, came the assertion, undated as to season but probably referring to the 1830's, that "Of the parrot . . . there are great numbers . . ." (Burlend, 1936:98).

Other Mississippi River records can be considered winter observations. Probably referring to his 1810 visit to Missouri (if a first-hand observation), Nuttall (1832:546) wrote that the parakeet was "so far hardy as to make its appearance, commonly in the depth of winter, along the woody banks of the Ohio . . . and Mississippi and Missouri around St. Louis . . . when nearly all other birds have migrated." On the Ohio, just above its mouth, Audubon found parakeets in December, 1810 (Audubon, 1942:152): "The large sycamores with white bark formed a lively contrast with the canes beneath them; and the thousands of parroquets, that came to roost in their hollow trunks at night, were to me objects of interest and curiosity."

The distribution of the parakeet in the Mississippi Valley seemed to be well known, for Drake (1815:118-119) described the bird as resident "constantly along the Mississippi, Ohio, and their tributary rivers, as far north as 39°30', and is seen occasionally up to 42°."

Not far from the place where Schoolcraft saw parakeets in July, 1818 (quoted above), Peale (1946-47:157) noted on June 2, 1819, when just above Cape Girardeau, that "parakeets are still to be seen." About the same time, Estwick Evans (1819:306), presumably referring to the Tennessee

shore, but in the latitude of southeastern Missouri, told of the geese, ducks, and swans that he saw in the Mississippi where "numerous paroquets occupy the trees on its banks. . . they go in flocks, and their notes are rapid, harsh, and incessant. It is remarkable, that this bird is subject to a disease resembling apoplexy." (The possibility of "apoplexy" is not too remote; see the interesting account of "Doodles," the pet Carolina Parakeet belonging to Paul Bartsch (1952).)

Paul-Wilhelm (1835:145; Bek transl., page 155) saw parakeets in the deep woods at the mouth of the Ohio in April, 1823 (Illinois side); their cries were rivaled by the noise of five species of woodpeckers.

Timothy Flint recorded several personal observations on parakeets during his descent of the Ohio in 1816, just before his travels in the Missouri region began. Toward the lower end of the Ohio he remarked how his "children contemplated with unsated curiosity the flocks of paroquets fluttering among the trees, when we came near the shore" (Flint, 1826:84). And of the Mississippi Valley, he wrote (1828, 1:108; 1832, 1:71-72):

This is a bird of the parrot class, seen from latitude 40° to the gulf of Mexico. Its food is the fruit of the sycamore, and its retreat in the hollow of that tree; and is a very voracious bird, preying on . . . all kinds of fruit. They fly in large flocks, and are seen in greatest numbers before a storm, or a great change in the weather. They have hooked, ivory bills, a splendid mixture of burnished gilding and green on their heads, and their bodies are a soft, and yet brilliant green. Their cry, as they are flying, is shrill and discordant. They are said to perch, by hanging by their bill to a branch. When they are taken, they make battle, and their hooked bill pounces into the flesh of their enemy. They are very annoying to fruit orchards, and in this respect a great scourge to the farmer. We have seen no bird of the size, with plumage so brilliant; and they impart a singular magnificence to the forest prospect, as they are seen darting through the foliage, and among the white branches of the sycamore.

Esthetically, this view is hard to reconcile with Flint's bald statement (1828, 2:73), in reference to Missouri: "The beautiful parroquet frequents the sycamore bottoms, and poorly compensates by the extreme beauty of its plumage for the injury it does the orchard and garden fruits."

Flint's sentiment on the destructiveness of parakeets was echoed by John Mason Peck (1831:50), who discussed the birds of the central Mississippi Valley: "the paroquette, with its fine plumage, annoys the orchards and gardens"; but he later modified his stand somewhat (Peck, 1853:34): "It annoys the orchards by eating the fruit . . . but its favorite food is the seeds of the cocklebur, which it devours greedily. And, . . . it may be the farmer receives as much benefit in the destruction of this annoying weed as will compensate the loss of his apples."

On the Mississippi, above the Ohio, in March, 1833, Maximilian saw "trees quite covered with these beautiful birds" (Wied, 1857:104). It was also in this region that a Lutheran pioneer, on his way to establish a colony in Mis-

souri in the winter of 1838–39, saw parakeets (Graebner, 1919:14). Eifrig placed the event either in Kentucky or in Mississippi County, Missouri, since it is not clear which side of the river the man was on. While on a hunt on “a large and beautiful farm,” a party “hunted a small species of Parrot, of which many were killed. They made a savory dish” (Eifrig, 1929). Baird (1858:68) listed an undated specimen from Cairo, Illinois, just across the Mississippi from southeastern Missouri, presented to the National Museum by Kennicott. Pindar (1925:86) heard that parakeets were occasional visitors to Fulton County, Kentucky, at the mouth of the Ohio, until 1878. Since relatively little is known of the parakeet in the Mississippi Valley above St. Louis (other than observations of Anderson and Burlend already quoted), it is worth remarking that Smith and Parmalee (1955:36) report, on the authority of T. E. Musselman, a sight record of a flock of parakeets in Adams County, Illinois, about mid-April, 1884. That is a late date for that area.

NORTHERN MISSOURI

North Missouri records for the parakeet are few. Widmann (1907:115) quoted the observations of Hoy who found the birds numerous in Grand River Valley, Livingstone County, in May, 1854 (Hoy, 1865). Trippe heard in 1872 that flocks of the birds had been known in extreme southern Iowa (Decatur County), but was not able to learn exact dates (Trippe, 1873:233).

MISSOURI VALLEY

Among early travelers on the Missouri River who recorded parakeets, Widmann cited Townsend (1839:131), who saw them at Boonville, April 8, 1834; Wied (in the German edition of his *Travels*, 1839–41, 1:261, 263, 272–273), who reported them from Boonville westward in April, 1833, and near St. Charles in May, 1834 (*ibid.*, 2:361); Audubon (Audubon and Coues, 1898, 1:468, 469, 470, 476; 2:173), who saw several flocks and collected some birds in May and again in October, 1843; Hoy (1865), who killed one parakeet April 21, 1854, at Boonville; and Hayden (1862:154), who supplied general information on the species in the lower Missouri as a whole for 1855–57. Widmann also presented previously unpublished records from Platte County, where the last birds were seen in the early 1850's; from Warren County, where the last report was 1867; and Franklin County, where the last known date was 1865. From the Missouri Valley, also, came one of Widmann's last reports of the parakeet: Atchison County, Kansas, across the Missouri River from Platte County, in 1904 (Widmann, 1907:116).

Lewis and Clark saw the parakeet in 1804. Clark noted in his journal June 26 at the mouth of the Kansas River: “I observed a great number of Parrot queets this evening” (Lewis and Clark, 1904, 1:59). And a note by Clark (*ibid.*, 6:122) said: “*Parotquet* is seen as high as the Mahar

[Omaha Indian] Village"—that is, to near the present town of Homer, Dakota County, Nebraska (Swenk, 1934:55).

The next record that I have is the substantial contribution of Peale, who ascended the Missouri with the Long expedition in the summer of 1819. He "heard the cries of a flock of parakeets" when only a short distance up the Missouri River on June 1. Traveling overland north of the Missouri, near the end of June, in St. Charles or Montgomery County, he wrote: "In what few bottoms we have come through we saw turkeys and heard the screech of parakeets." Parakeets abounded in the "buttonwood" (sycamore) forests on Loutre Island in the Missouri at the Montgomery-Warren County line, and they were still "numerous" near Cedar creek at the Callaway-Boone County line, Franklin, Howard County, and near Ft. Osage (now Sibley, Jackson County) (Peale, 1946-47:162, 267, 268, 270, 273, 275, 282). Peale reached Ft. Osage on August 1.

Paul-Wilhelm, an observant German nobleman, walked and paddled up the Missouri Valley in the summer of 1823. Just before reaching the Gasconade River, June 1, he noted (1835:221; Bek transl., p. 234): "For several days I had hardly heard the song of a single wild bird. Only the piercing cries of flocks of restless parrots and the occasional hammering of a red-headed woodpecker broke the deathlike silence." About the middle of June, he walked opposite Tabo Creek (that is, in Carroll or Ray County) (*ibid.*:254; Bek transl., p. 268): "The great amount of game, especially the great number of turkeys, and the sight of countless birds, especially the great flocks of parrots, as also the splendid luxuriant trees, together with the incomparable fragrance of the linden trees in full bloom, all these things would have repaid me amply for the strenuous foot-journey, if my attention had not been diverted in a painful manner by countless insects." By the end of June, Paul-Wilhelm (*ibid.*:246; Bek, p. 279) was above Ft. Osage when he observed: "Both banks are low, and the left was very sparsely settled. I do not recall ever having seen so many parrots in one place. When I shot one of these from a tree on which hundreds of these birds were sitting, the others did not fly away, but only made a horrible noise. The same is true if they sight a bird of prey. The flesh of these parrots is tough and black. Fish like it, however, and so it is used for bait." Parakeets were also seen (*ibid.*:274; Bek transl., p. 289) above Little Platte River, Platte County, and "great flocks" of them were seen near present St. Joseph in mid-July (*ibid.*:278; Bek transl., p. 294).

Duden saw parakeets in the winter of 1825, in Warren County; but in his letters of two years' residence, he mentioned them only once. They were destructive in orchards, he wrote a friend; "in particular, they hurl themselves in swarms upon apples" (Duden, 1829:93). It is not plain if he based his statement of their destructiveness on personal observation. There is another

record of the species from the same region at that time, for Bernhard saw several parakeets in the forests of "large and very thick sycamores" near St. Charles in April, 1826 (Bernhard, 1828, 2:99).

Beginning the decade of the 1830's, Ferris saw parakeets just west of Franklin in February, 1830 (Ferris, 1940:10): "Near the village we met with innumerable flocks of paroquets . . . whose beautiful plumage of green and gold flashed above us like an atmosphere of gems." J. T. Irving saw parakeets on the Missouri at Leavenworth in August, 1833 (Irving, 1955:25). They were plentiful at Independence in April, 1834 (Townsend, 1839:139); while, in June of the same year, Sir Charles Augustus Murray (1839, 1:184), when just west of Leavenworth, exercised his fowling-piece upon the only feathered things present, "a small flock of green Perroquets." Unlike Paul-Wilhelm, he found them palatable. A species of parrot "that fly in droves" was reported from near Columbia about 1835 by the wife of the Boone County pioneer, Lenoir; ". . . they are not so large but their plumage brighter—we intend getting some to tame; if you can ketch one and handle it some it will not leave you" (Atherton, 1943-44:290). Count Arese saw several flocks of parakeets in the Ft. Leavenworth-St. Joseph area in summer, 1837 (Arese, 1934:67).

In a remarkably beautiful tribute to the parakeets that had "ceased to come to central Missouri since many years," Gert Goebel, a German immigrant, wrote of the species in early Franklin County. I feel that the account deserves full quotation (from Goebel, 1877; Bek transl., 1919-25, 16:549-550):

Until the later thirties great flocks of paroquets came into our region every fall and frequently remained till the following spring. They were a small variety, about the size of a dove. They were bright green in color, and their heads were orange colored. These flocks of paroquets were a real ornament to the trees stripped of their foliage in the winter. The sight was particularly attractive, when such a flock of several hundred had settled on a big sycamore, when the bright green color of the birds was in such marked contrast with the white bark of the trees, and when the sun shone brightly upon these inhabited tree tops, the many yellow heads looked like so many candles.

This sight always reminded me vividly of a kind of Christmas tree, which was used by the poorer families in my native city [Germany]. A few weeks before Christmas a young birch tree was set in a pail of water. In the warm room it soon began to produce delicate leaves. When on Christmas eve such a tree was decorated with gilded and silvered nuts and with apples and candies, it did not look unlike one of these bird-covered tree tops, only these enormous Christmas trees of the forest looked vastly more imposing than the little birch in the warm room.

As the settlements increased and the forests were more and more cleared away, these birds ceased to come. The few old settlers of the days, when the paroquets frequented these parts, feel just as little at home as those beautiful birds did; they long for peace and quiet, whether above the earth or beneath, it does not matter.

(It is interesting that Bek, editor and translator of Goebel and Duden, was impressed by Goebel's eloquent testimony; he had considered Duden's

remarks on parakeets [cited above] as a flight of the latter's Romantic imagination: Bek had lived 30 years in Missouri without seeing any parakeets! [Bek, 1919-25, 16:550].)

On the Missouri Valley trip in 1843, Audubon gave but casual attention to parakeets in Missouri. On May 7 and 8, 1843, near the northwestern corner of the state, he wrote in his journal (Audubon and Coues, 1898, 1:476): "Indigo birds [*Passerina cyanea*] and Parrakeets plentiful. . . . We saw Parrakeets and many small birds, but nothing new or very rare." Parakeets and Indigo Buntings in the same breath! (Widmann notices some other Audubon references.) In his journal of the Audubon trip, Edward Harris (1951:55) noted that the first parakeets were seen at Boonville, April 29 (not Independence, where the first ones were killed [Audubon and Coues, 1898, 1:468]). The Harris group is reported to have procured 13 parakeets on the trip upriver and eight on the passage down the Missouri; of these, 10 apparently fell to Harris as his share (Harris, 1951:207, 210, 211). This must refer only to parakeets preserved as museum specimen skins, for Audubon wrote that at least 17 parakeets were killed near St. Joseph on May 4 (Audubon and Coues, 1898, 1:470).

J. N. Baskett, while unfortunately giving no specific records, summed up the situation for about 1850 (Lewis and Clark, 1904, 6:122): "The parrotquet has now practically been exterminated throughout the West; but it was found in abundance in the region of Jefferson City, Missouri (and probably even farther down the river), up to the middle of the nineteenth century." (This was written about 1900.)

There are two records of the parakeet from central and western Missouri in the 1850's that bear out Baskett's statement. Bruff wrote, on April 21, 1849, a short distance above Jefferson City: "We wooded, on the right bank Paroquets numerous" (Bruff, 1949:5). Baird (1858:68) listed the 12 specimens of parakeets collected by Warren and Hayden (Hayden, 1862:154) on April 24 and 25, 1856, on or near "Bald Island," Nebraska, near Atchison County (Swenk, 1934:56). In this area, near Brownsville, Nemaha County, Nebraska, an abundance of parakeets still survived a few years later: "I remember one season some young men raised a hundred or more of them for sale, sending them to other states. During the year 1866, or thereabout, they all suddenly disappeared, and never since to my knowledge have been seen. . . . Their nesting places were in the hollows of old trees on the island referred to" (about 10 miles above Brownsville) (Furnas, 1902). This report is probably the nearest approach to a genuine nesting record for the Carolina Parakeet in the Missouri region.

From central Missouri, where the parakeet had been so often seen in the 1820's and 1830's, a correspondent informed Cooke (1888:124) that they

were still present at Fayette in 1884–85, but were nearly extinct. The species was included in 1883 without comment in the contemporary fauna of Howard and Chariton counties (Anon., 1883:389–390). (Of some 70 county and other regional Missouri histories that I have examined, this and the confused parakeet reference in the Dunklin County history [Smyth-Davis, 1896] listed elsewhere are the only accounts of the parakeet that I found [McKinley, 1960].)

The bird had been abundant at one time about Kansas City, according to Harris (1919:270). He recorded a specimen then in the Kansas City Public Library, taken by Bryant in 1894, and remarked further: "In some unaccountable manner a lone bird strayed into the Courtney [Jackson County] bottoms in 1912 and was observed by Bush for several weeks before it finally disappeared" (*ibid.*). If the latter record is correct (and Bush seems to have been an active and reliable naturalist), it is the last date, by several years, for the parakeet in Missouri. The American Ornithologists' Union (1957:267) cautiously lists this as "possibly an escaped cage bird," but mentions as the last reported kill for the region a parakeet taken opposite Platte County, at Potter, Atchison County, Kansas, in August, 1904 (see Widmann, 1907:116; Remsburg, 1906; and Anon., 1906).

SOUTHERN MISSOURI

The parakeet is mentioned only once in the county histories of southern Missouri (actually, this relatively poor section of the state has had few histories written on its counties); that is a puzzling reference to the bird at an early date in Dunklin County (Smyth-Davis, 1896:25). That parakeets did occur in that area is confirmed by Featherstonhaugh's observations made in early November, 1834, while he was in what is now Butler County. He saw the first cane (*Arundinaria*), and then remarked: "We had also other indications of a Southern latitude here: small flocks of parroquets were wheeling and screaming about in the bright sun, and showing their brilliant colours to the greatest advantage" (Featherstonhaugh, 1844:83).

In May, 1840, Tixier (1940:106) saw huge flocks of parakeets in the "points" of forest along prairie streams between Independence and Harrisonville in western Missouri. Later, in August, he saw them near the mouth of the Osage, as he returned by boat down that river to St. Louis (*ibid.*:279). He was by then in fairly well settled, cleared land along the Osage River.

Widmann (1907:116) reported Merriam's second-hand record from Stone County in the autumn of 1891 (Merriam, 1892). Both the map of Hasbrouck (1891) and Butler's distribution data (1892:53) indicated that the Oklahoma population of parakeets reached almost to or quite into Missouri in the early 1890's. Nice (1931:101–102) listed several reports for northeastern Okla-

TABLE 1
RECORDS OF THE CAROLINA PARAKEET IN MISSOURI

Occurrences recorded by month		Occurrences recorded only by season	
January	0	Spring	1
February	1	Summer	7
March	1	Autumn	2
April	8	Winter	5
May	4	"All Seasons"	2
June	6		
July	4		
August	3		
September	0	Occurrences for which there are no specific seasonal data	
October	1		13
November	1		
December	1		

homa, but she had, however, no specific records from counties bordering Missouri. Widmann reported a final sight record from Stone County, Missouri, in July, 1905 (Widmann, 1907:116).

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

There is no lack of reliable, even eloquent, testimony on the abundance of the Carolina Parakeet in Missouri, at least for the broad river-bottom forests along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Travelers who saw no other creatures (or, if they did, thought them unworthy of their journals) wrote of the magnificence of flocks of parakeets they saw in the state, both in winter and in summer (spring and summer records predominate; see Table 1). A pioneer woman wrote about them in her letters; a German settler cherished their memory; preachers dwelt on their beauty. They were certainly common into the 1840's; Audubon's party shot them without concern in 1843. Widmann gave the 1850's as the decade of the last common flocks in Missouri, but there were some later congregations, apparently even colonial nestings, in the region into the 1860's (Furnas). Probably the last Missouri specimen of which there is record was taken at Kansas City in 1894, but there were sight records in or near Missouri for 1904, 1905, and 1912. No nests were recorded from Missouri, although several observers claimed in a general way that sycamore trees were used for both nesting and roosting. Furnas's account is the best nesting record for the region, I believe.

The birds' passing is a mystery. They were undoubtedly held in disfavor for their destruction of fruit, but that point ought not to be overemphasized. They never appeared on a bounty list, and they were almost totally ignored in the county histories. Surely, if they were ever a scourge to agriculture,

their names would have appeared more commonly on the pages of these two records of materialism and manifest destiny. Some were probably shot for food or other uses, but the number could not have been great. More often, perhaps, they were shot because they furnished an easy, returning target. Primeval numbers of parakeets are not easy to guess at: they were noisy, colorful, and conspicuous birds that went about in flocks; the extent of their wanderings is not known. That is, probably anyone with an eye for birds would see them; and, if they wandered very much, one flock might be seen by people in different areas. Perhaps they had a liking for the kind of habitat created by man, at least for purposes of feeding; if so, the lack of a general sentiment in pioneer society for their protection may have been their downfall. The possibility that disease was responsible cannot be ruled out, but except for a suggestion of "apoplexy," I have no evidence for it.

Since parakeets used hollow trees for roosting and nesting, there may have been connections between the disappearance of the birds and the wholesale cutting of "bee trees." The European honey bee barely preceded the American white man in invading the central parts of America, and it became extremely abundant within a short time. I am convinced, by numerous references collected during a search through early literature, that the magnitude of destruction of hollow trees by "bee hunters" in search of honey and wax is little appreciated. What effect, if any, that had on the parakeet is unknown. Perhaps the bees themselves discouraged nesting and roosting flocks of parakeets. Reasons for their decline are made doubly difficult to evaluate by the lack of knowledge of the breeding biology, habitat, and social requirements of the species.

Excellent reviews of the parakeet in Oklahoma (Nice, 1931) and Nebraska (Swenk, 1934) have been published. Nothing has been added to parakeet literature in Kansas since the time of Goss (1891). In Iowa and Illinois the relatively scanty material can be found in Anderson (1907), DuMont (1933), Cory (1909), and Smith and Parmalee (1955). The best review of the bird in early Arkansas is in Howell's paper (1911). The collected records for Kentucky and Tennessee so far published are not exhaustive and much remains to be done in the case of Illinois, Arkansas, and Kansas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study has been rewritten from part of a master's thesis, "A Wildlife Chronology for Missouri." It is an attempt to bring together for naturalists the many scattered historical records on the Carolina Parakeet. I wish to thank William H. Elder and Thomas S. Baskett, Missouri Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, University of Missouri, for advice and encouragement, and to record my indebtedness to three helpful librarians: Ann Todd Rubey, University of Missouri; Sarah Guitar, Missouri State Historical Society, Columbia; and Norman L. Ford, Josselyn Van Tyne Memorial Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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